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INTIMACY DIRECTION: A NEW ROLE IN CONTEMPORARY THEATRE MAKING

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

Intimacy direction is a radical new vision for the performing arts, calling all practitioners to implement consent as a creative practice. Methods for staging intimacy have shifted over time to match changing cultural beliefs, staging techniques, and performance styles. Despite this, there has been limited research regarding contemporary best practices for crafting these stories. In 2016, Intimacy Directors International became the first organization to collate and codify intimacy methodologies and actively advocate for the intimacy director's collaborative yet distinct role.

In the wake of the #metoo movement, which went viral in 2017, the demand for intimacy direction has grown exponentially, due primarily to the role's ability to alter dangerous and coercive power structures. This position utilizes a three-pronged approach of advocacy, choreographic expertise, and remodeled protocols and policies to facilitate safe and effective intimate storytelling. It uses a framework that prioritizes an individual's agency and values process over product.

The sustainability of this discipline depends on creating an accessible and consistent body of knowledge for practitioners. This dissertation synthesizes multidisciplinary theoretical frameworks with the real-time experiential data collected by my professional colleagues and me, working on this industry's front-lines to support the widespread implementation of intimacy direction. Additionally, I argue that while intimacy direction is designed explicitly for intimate scenes (namely those involving nudity or simulated sex), its core concepts can act as a model for other disciplines to re-define their relationship to power, inclusion, and sustainability.

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INTRODUCTION

Intimacy direction has become a leading discourse topic in theatrical higher education and professional entertainment within the last year. The contemporary political and cultural climate has drawn particular attention to the role of the intimacy director and its potential to promote advocacy and enhanced artistic practices for intimate scenes. In this dissertation, I define this emerging new role of intimacy director as a collaborative yet distinct position specializing in the choreography and safe facilitation of scenes of intimacy. With this definition, I argue that this position can radically alter dangerous and coercive power structures that have existed, often unchecked, within the creative industries, and redefine their understanding of consent and how it functions both in the rehearsal room and during a performance. When applied to scenes of physical intimacy, this understanding of consensual working may also dramatically impact how we approach non-intimate scenes, which can reshape the broader creative culture moving forward.

As this industry is still in its early years, I primarily draw upon my own experience as a professional intimacy director for theatre/live performance and intimacy coordinator for TV and film. In the past four years, while writing this dissertation, this industry has changed rapidly, to the point that whole chapters have needed to be re-written to keep up with the dynamically evolving professional landscape. During this time, my career has grown exponentially. In 2016, I began experimenting with intimacy direction under the mentorship of Tonia Sina, starting with small student productions at the University of Illinois. In 2017, I had the privilege of assisting Alicia Rodis for a short time during her intimacy direction of *Slave Play* by Jeremy O. Harris at the Yale School of Drama. This production later moved to Broadway and received acclaim for its

continued incorporation of intimacy direction (by Claire Warden and Teniece Divya Johnson). In 2017, I also became an Associate Director at Intimacy Directors International and traveled across the country teaching workshops at universities about the intimacy director's role and work. In late 2018, I relocated to Los Angeles, where I worked on some of the most prominent TV and film sets with A-list celebrities including Reese Witherspoon, Kerry Washington, John C. Riley, and Kendrick Lamar, among others. I am currently a member of the Intimacy Coordination Working Group at SAG-AFTRA, a collective of intimacy coordinators who collaborate on the standardization of this position in tv and film. Finally, I co-founded and am now the CEO of Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (IDC), formed in 2019 after the dissolution of Intimacy Directors International.

I speak of my accomplishments, not to boast about professional achievements, but to highlight my extensive experience as a professional intimacy director and coordinator. Intimacy direction is developing rapidly under the pressures of industry demand while simultaneously attempting to cohere as a singular definition of the position and how it functions. Both theory and practice work symbiotically to accommodate an expanding understanding of the movement, the role, and its effect on power structures in contemporary performance.

In this dissertation, I use several terms to identify someone who works in intimacy performance. I use the term "intimacy direction" to describe the specific approach to performing scenes of intimacy as first defined by Intimacy Directors International and later strengthened by Intimacy Directors and Coordinators. An intimacy director actively practices this new approach for theatre and live performance and shares this new discipline's core values.

Staged intimacy is not a new concept, and many have directed and choreographed intimacy before 2016 with varying degrees of success; however, I use the term "intimacy

direction” exclusively in reference to this movement in an attempt to clarify that the intimacy director’s work is distinctly different than the work of those who have staged intimacy in the past, regardless of whether or not someone utilized choreography. I use the term “sex choreographer” or “intimacy choreographer” to denote someone who may be utilizing choreography but whose approach may not utilize the same principles as intimacy direction.

Intimacy direction centralizes active and informed consent and values the approach and choreographic process over the product or performance. The intimacy director’s role marks a radical shift in how intimacy has been approached historically and changes the rehearsal room’s structure. I use intimacy direction as a catch-all term for staging intimacy in most mediums and the term intimacy coordinator when explicitly discussing film or television.

These terms, originated by Tonia Sina (intimacy director) and Alicia Rodis (intimacy coordinator), were born out of their staged violence counterparts – fight director for live performance and stunt coordinator for TV and film. This linking of staged violence and staged intimacy has helped situate the role of the intimacy director, how it functions within the creative team, where it’s needed, and its responsibilities. While these two choreographers’ roles are vastly different, as I will explore in chapter one, they both deal in theatrical illusion, safety, and hyper exposed physicality. The parallels between these two positions create a common language for stage managers, artistic producers, and directors to quickly integrate intimacy professionals into the creative process. These titles also adhere to the current union contract language.

As the entertainment industry begins to interact with this emerging role, several other titles have emerged, such as intimacy coaches, consultants, choreographers, and designers, among others. For this work to reach its full potential to shape the entertainment landscape, the industry must utilize the proper terminology for this new position and separate the work of

intimacy directors today from “sex choreographers”¹ of the past. Understanding this new approach and its burgeoning ethical code will help solidify some of the revolutionary culture changes not just within the context of scenes of intimacy but in the entertainment landscape as a whole.

A Brief History of Intimacy Direction in the United States

Staging scenes of intimacy is not new to the performing arts, with many practitioners developing their own methods and techniques out of necessity. Because of this, the documentation of the genealogy of intimacy direction is quite complicated. In this brief and incomplete history of intimacy direction, I illuminate the emergence of intimacy direction as a specific and codified practice for intimacy direction. While born from multidisciplinary contributions and practical explorations, the lineage of intimacy direction that I detail below is tied specifically to the role as initially defined and pioneered by Intimacy Directors International.

There are several professionals whose work has and continues to inform intimacy direction as a discipline whose names are not mentioned in this section. I acknowledge this industry’s interdisciplinary nature and invite a more nuanced investigation of its history and web of influence. I focus specifically on the careers of Tonia Sina and Alicia Rodis as instrumental figures in the areas of intimacy direction and intimacy coordination, respectively. Their work as pioneers in this discipline rests on the shoulders of numerous other scholars, practitioners, and artists.

¹ Paumgarten, “A Sex Choreographer at Work.”

Early foundational research for the movement dates back to 2006 when Tonia Sina wrote her MFA thesis on intimacy choreography for Virginia Commonwealth University entitled “*Intimate Encounters: Staging Intimacy and Sensuality*.”² Her work is primarily acknowledged as one of the first publications attempting to codify a method for staging intimacy. Sina’s approach, Intimacy for the Stage, has become a cornerstone for establishing a body of knowledge to support this distinct specialty and profession. After leaving VCU with her MFA, Sina traveled mostly to stage combat conferences, offering short workshops in crafting intimate stories. The areas of fight choreography and intimacy choreography are historically intertwined as they both deal with creating the illusions of heightened physicality. The techniques of masking, movement, and holding a technique to ensure the safety of the actor and their scene partner continues to be a common through-line of both art forms. Adam Noble, a Certified Teacher with the Society of American Fight Directors (SAFD), published his methodology for staging intimacy in the *Fight Master* magazine as a technique that could be used interchangeably between fight scenes and intimate scenes.³ Tonia Sina⁴ and Alicia Rodis⁵ also published their early research in the *Fight Master* magazine as a resource for fight choreographers who have been asked to take on the burden of intimacy choreography before its professionalization attempts.

Tonia Sina and Alicia Rodis met in New York City early in 2016 to discuss the work that they had both been doing independently. Rodis, who had been teaching workshops in the city on

² Sina, “Intimate Encounters.”

³ Noble, “Sex & Violence: Practical Approaches for Dealing with Extreme Stage Physicality.”

⁴ Sina, “Intimate Encounters.”

⁵ Rodis, “Killing Desdemona: Creating Safe Spaces for Dangerous Work.”

consent and staging intimacy, immediately connected with Sina's work. They were both connected to the Society of American Fight Directors (SAFD), Rodis being a Certified Teacher with the SAFD, and had many shared colleagues. After this meeting, they collaborated with Canadian intimacy director Siobhan Richardson and founded Intimacy Directors International (IDI), a 501c6 not-for-profit.

IDI's mission was to create a unified definition of the intimacy director's role and demonstrate how the position can promote the ethical and safe performance of scenes of intimacy. They hoped to highlight the great need for a codified system for choreographing these scenes by offering a methodology, technique, and policy adaptations. The early and independent research of Sina, Rodis, and Richardson, many years before its dramatic rise in popularity, ensured a tried and true methodology behind the work before its rapid expansion later that year. Simultaneously, artists such as Adam Noble, Sasha Smith, and Rachel Flesher (among others) advocated for their work as intimacy specialists and choreographers. Many of these artists had met or learned of the work Sina, Rodis, and Richardson were doing but were largely isolated in their professional markets and pioneered this work before developing a network of intimacy professionals.

As founders of Intimacy Directors International, Sina, Rodis, and Richardson collaborated on a document that has since become known as "The Pillars of Intimacy Direction" or, in some cases, only "The Pillars." This document details the five core principles that underly intimacy direction as its distinct discipline: context, consent, communication, choreography, and closure. The alliterative aspects of the document were simply a bonus. In early 2017 when I officially joined the IDI team, I contributed to the editing and formatting of this document and all later versions, including "The Pillars for Actors" and "The Pillars for TV and Film." This

original work, “The Pillars,” has become widely acknowledged as the foundational ideology behind intimacy direction as we know it today. While it does not detail a specific approach, it provides a framework for a unified definition of the position.

The rise in popularity of intimacy direction between 2016 and 2017 can be explained, in part, by the recent validation and public acknowledgment of the pervasive nature of sexual harassment in the entertainment industries. The years 2016 and 2017 are marked by a plethora of media events that laid a foundation for stories surrounding sexual harassment and abuse within the creative industries to come to light and be validated.

One such watershed event took place in Chicago. On June 8, 2016, the *Chicago Reader* published an expose: “*At Profiles Theatre the drama – and abuse – is real.*” Journalists Aimee Levitt and Christopher Piatt investigated almost two decades of emotional and physical abuse at a professional non-union theatre in Chicago, Profiles Theatre. The accused perpetrator was Darrell W. Cox, formerly the artistic director at Profiles Theatre, who also starred in many productions. In this piece, one can find consistent themes of abuse disguised as rehearsal, violence disguised as choreography, and assault disguised as acting. While the exact violations at Profiles Theatre are not the subject of this study, the “Profiles Incident” is a turning point in the world of Chicago’s professional theatre and a watershed moment in the conversation about intimacy direction.⁶

This event spotlighted work done by the Chicago group, Not in Our House, an organization created in 2016. Organized in response to a viral social media post by Lori Meyers, their organization and work created a platform for non-equity Chicago artists to find resources for the

⁶ Kerr, “How HBO Is Changing Sex Scenes Forever.”

prevention of abuse and harassment. The outpouring of stories from the community demanded change. They then used their platform to gain traction for their document, “Chicago Theatre Standards,” in 2017. This document gave some basic outlines for preventing sexual harassment in non-equity theatres who do not fall under the protection of Actors Equity Association.⁷ This movement remains intertwined with the history of intimacy direction, not only because both movements were working to reduce and eliminate sexual harassment in the creative industries, but both were attempting to reshape cultural norms within entertainment. Intimacy director Sasha Smith, who was working independently at the time, collaborated with Laura Fisher, teaching intimacy work alongside the Chicago Theatre Standards.⁸ Sasha Smith is now an executive member of Intimacy Directors and Coordinators and a leading intimacy professional.

In the summer of 2017, Tonia Sina worked at the Stratford Festival on their production of the Bakkhai. This prestigious choreography gig was not the first major house to explore the role, as Sina’s students had splintered off in many directions since 2006 and were advocating for the position. But it gained national attention when it was on the cover of the arts section in the *New York Times*. The piece entitled, “Need to Fake an Orgasm? There’s an ‘Intimacy Choreographer’ for That” acted as an introduction to this role for many who had not been privy to one of Sina’s or Rodis’ earlier workshops. This article created a national conversation and became actively linked to the Profiles Theatre incident and the many other theatre and performance companies coming under fire for indecent conduct. Later that summer, as the demand for more information continued to surge, Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard launched another organization, Theatrical

⁷ Lopez, “Not in Our Theatre.”

⁸ “Sasha Smith.”

Intimacy Education (TIE). Focusing on consent education and intimacy choreography practices for academia and live performance. Their initial rhetoric did not advocate specifically for the role of the intimacy director (though they did advertise being intimacy choreographers themselves), instead taking the approach that safe staging practices could be learned and implemented by all.⁹

Like all lasting movements, the foundational work often happens long before it comes to public attention. These high-profile cases were used to push the conversation to a new level and opened new doors and budget lines that allowed intimacy direction to flourish. One of the most notable cultural changes came in 2017 when the #metoo movement went viral. The great social and cultural movement originated in 2006 when Tarana Burke, a Black woman, first coined the phrase “me too” in response to acts of sexual violence. The phrase “Me Too” has since grown to represent the multitudes of marginalized individuals who have suffered from sexual harassment or sexual violence. These actions are normalized as a part of American society as a female or person of another marginalized group. #Metoo became a viral phenomenon on Twitter and other social media platforms in October of 2017 when actress Alyssa Milano tweeted the phrase as a hashtag. Social media offered an unprecedented platform for all, not just professionals in entertainment, to join the movement in an online rallying cry for victims of sexual harassment.¹⁰ People posted their stories or simply reposted the hashtag to self-identify as someone who has experienced sexual harassment. This rapid and massive media attention made this rampant harassment impossible to ignore or overlook. In many ways, this movement permitted the

⁹ “Theatrical Intimacy Education.”

¹⁰ Interwoven within this cultural moment is also the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States and the Women’s March, one of the largest national protests.

victims to speak out about their experiences and demonstrate this problem's pervasiveness in mainstream society.

The entertainment industry, in particular, came under fire as influential figures in the entertainment industry began to be taken down by an onslaught of accusations. Talk show hosts, comedians, actors, directors, producers, crew members, and many more were being outed as (often repeat) offenders. The sexual assault allegations against Harvey Weinstein shook Hollywood to the core as another watershed moment in entertainment where it was impossible to deny the normalized culture of abuse and harassment. On January 1, 2018, over 300 women in Hollywood created the coalition named Times Up to advance the conversation regarding sexual assault and harassment in the TV and film industry specifically. This movement gained national attention during the 2018 Golden Globe ceremonies when many a-list celebrities attended wearing all black in solidarity.¹¹

Shortly after the Harvey Weinstein scandal's announcement, HBO's television show, *The Deuce*, reached out to Alicia Rodis. She had been working as an intimacy director for theatre and stunt coordinator for tv and film (work that would later become the foundation for intimacy coordination). The show is a period piece whose main characters were involved in the adult film industry, and it features a wide variety of simulated pornography and graphic nudity. During the first season, actress Emily Meade began to inquire about whether or not there was someone that the show could employ who would act as an advocate during her most vulnerable scenes. In an interview with HBO, Meade commented that she "started thinking about how when you're doing

¹¹ Weaver, "Golden Globes 2018: Black Dresses, Time's Up Pins, Activist Plus Ones, and Everything Else You Need to Know | Vanity Fair."

a stunt of any kind, even as simple as crossing the street with cars, or if there's a child or animal on set, there are people who legally have to be there to protect and facilitate. People who have expertise. And yet when it comes to sexuality, which is one of the most vulnerable things for all humans, men and women, there's really no system. There's never been a person required to be there to protect and bring expertise.”¹² Meade's request sparked the conversation about bringing on an intimacy coordinator and building the position.

Rodis was able to utilize her previous work in stunt coordination alongside her intimacy work for live performance to revolutionize the treatment of nudity and simulated sex on the show *The Deuce*. Her success in this role became such an asset to the production that it ultimately led to the announcement that HBO would require that intimacy coordinators be present on every set that involved nudity and simulated sex.¹³ Again, this commitment sparked national attention and widespread media coverage and amplified the intimacy coordination platform for tv and film, which in turn continued to feedback into the movement that had been growing in theatre and live performance.

As the position gained national attention, the actors union for TV and film, SAG-AFTRA, reached out to Alicia Rodis and later, Amanda Blumenthal of Intimacy Professionals Association,¹⁴ to begin working on an intimacy coordination initiative. The goal of this initiative

¹² Morton, “How Emily Meade Started a Conversation and Brought Change to Set.”

¹³ Kerr, “How HBO Is Changing Sex Scenes Forever.”

¹⁴ Amanda Blumenthal was one of the first to be trained in intimacy coordination by Alicia Rodis to work for an HBO production. Blumenthal launched her own intimacy coordination training

is to provide national support for productions utilizing intimacy coordinators. This project has expanded to include more than 30 working intimacy coordinators, including myself, and has released guidelines for intimate scenes and standards for intimacy coordinators.¹⁵

Intimacy direction reached another critical milestone with its inclusion on Broadway stages, beginning with Claire Warden’s work in 2019 on the production of *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune*, directed by Arin Arbus and starring Audra McDonald and Michael Shannon.¹⁶ This piece received national attention from the New York Times and validated the position as a mainstay of contemporary theatre-making. Since this production, Warden has gone on to intimacy direct six more Broadway shows, including *Jagged Little Pill*, *Company*, and *Slave Play* by Jeremy O. Harris, which she co-choreographed with intimacy director, Teniece Divya Johnson.¹⁷ The inclusion of this role on Broadway has been critical to validating its importance as a profession.

In late 2019, the not-for-profit Intimacy Directors International decided to close its doors. Their public statement offers that this organization’s mission was complete and there needed to be room for new and more agile organizations to carry on the mantle of intimacy work. In March of 2020, they released the following statement: “The industry is successfully launched, IDI’s original mission is fulfilled, and IDI wants to step back to allow all of the new professionals and

program and agency, Intimacy Professionals Association (IPA) in 2019 and continues to be a key voice in the development of this discipline.

¹⁵ SAG-AFTRA, “SAG-AFTRA to Standardize Guidelines for Intimacy Coordinators.”

¹⁶ Collins-Hughes, “How Audra McDonald and Michael Shannon Got Intimate.”

¹⁷ Warden also assisted Rodis on the original production of *Slave Play* at Yale University

organizations to fill in the niches that have emerged with greater efficacy than we would be able to provide. The board and leadership of IDI have taken a very long time to reach this decision, but we are confident in it.”¹⁸ During this time, my colleagues Alicia Rodis, Tonia Sina, Marie Percy, and I formed the organization Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (IDC) with the support of business advisors Jackie Hyland and Esteban Gast. In the past year, we have launched a pathway to certification for industry professionals and expanded our industry education offerings, serving over 1000 individual artists.

In the past three years, universities have also begun to bring in workshops to educate their students and staff. Alicia Rodis has collaborated on protocols for nudity and simulated sex for Julliard, Columbia University, and Yale School of Drama, among others. My colleagues at Intimacy Directors and Coordinators and I have collectively worked, presented, or consulted with more than 60 universities across the nation, inviting widespread discussion to implement this role in academic theatre.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, there remains a bit of mystery as to how live performance will recover and where intimacy direction will expand once it does. There is an opportunity to re-imagine the theatrical landscape as more inclusive and actively anti-racist in these turbulent times. As intimacy direction is a relatively new industry, it remains agile to this form of self-reflection. It is our responsibility to make the most of this time for the longevity of the role and this industry. Intimacy direction was recently included in the list of demands set out by We See You White American Theatre in the widely distributed document “*Our Demands*,” which was

¹⁸ Intimacy Directors International, “<https://www.teamidi.org/>.”

signed by 300+ Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) theatremakers.¹⁹ This document lists intimacy direction and racially sensitive intimacy training as a requirement for inclusive spaces.²⁰ IDC has engaged in critical analysis of our bias as a predominantly white institution and is actively working to combat the white supremacy that we consciously and unconsciously uphold. With the increase in online education due to COVID-19, IDC has increased training opportunities and has created virtual resources that have greatly expanded this information's reach and accessibility.

Additionally, IDC is using this time to investigate our pedagogy to de-center the white experience and promote anti-racist modes of working. As this pandemic continues, and with the announcement that Broadway will be shut down until at least May of 2021, the broader theatre industry has an opportunity to grapple with these questions. It is my hope that professionals use

¹⁹ We See You W.A.T, "Our Demands."

²⁰ As of October 2020, the list of certified intimacy directors by Intimacy Directors and Coordinators remains predominantly white, with three Black intimacy professionals, whose names are Sasha Smith, Teniece Divya Johnson, and Nicole Calendar. As a leader of IDC, I acknowledge that Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) have been largely erased from the narrative of intimacy direction. IDC believes that intimacy direction can only be successful when it disavows all forms of white supremacy. We See You White American Theatre demands that intimacy direction becomes a standard practice in the theatre and also demands that all intimacy directors be culturally conscious and anti-racist for the advocacy of all bodies. These demands are an invitation to be better as a discipline for the advocacy of all.

this forced pause as a chance to listen, breathe, and pivot, exploring alternative futures for the sustainability of all professionals in theatre.

Intimacy direction was not created in a vacuum, and many artists fought through early questions of intimacy that provided the foundation for the work of intimacy direction today. The practice of intimacy direction as advocated by Intimacy Directors International, and now Intimacy Directors and Coordinators is revolutionary and radical, but it is not the choreography alone that has turned this artistic discipline into a cultural movement. Intimacy direction emphasizes actor agency, consent, and collaborative art-making that directly challenges many of the most dominant historical beliefs about creating and viewing theatre, tv, and film. This work has blossomed internationally, with intimacy direction and coordination in the UK, Canada, Israel, Germany, South Africa, Australia, and elsewhere.

The process for creating intimacy choreography differentiates this movement from other staged intimacy practices. The emphasis on consent and personal agency becomes intertwined with the understanding of the role of the intimacy director. The role transcends visual output and emphasizes the physical safety and emotional wellbeing of the actors who put these stories on their bodies and in their minds night after night, and the crew members that act as accomplices and witnesses to these stories. Intimacy direction is more than an art form, a choreography technique, or a social movement – it is more than the sum of its parts. It has the ability to affect and influence the field far beyond scenes of intimacy. To make this argument, I have divided my dissertation into five chapters that I have outlined below.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One: The Role of the Intimacy Director

Starting broadly, I set the framework for the role of the intimacy director and how it affects the contemporary theatre landscape. I utilize John French and Bertram Raven's six bases of power and Sophie Hennekham and Dawn Bennet's five factors relating to sexual harassment in the creative industries to examine the systems of power that currently inhibit the actor's ability to give and receive consent. Additionally, these structures normalize sexual harassment as part of the professional industry. Using this theoretical foundation, I articulate how the intimacy director can act as a power check on some of these more complicated structures while supporting new distributions of power that can combat the traditional hierarchical structures. By examining the role of the intimacy director in practice, I uncover how the environment can respond to the cultural shift and assist in disrupting unidirectional linear systems of power. While the intimacy director is never truly outside of the power dynamic, certain people will inherently be better suited to this position than others. I clarify why the intimacy director should not also be the director and discuss other lines of power within theatrical titles.

Efforts from a variety of other theatrical departments support intimacy direction to promote actor wellness and safety. In respecting the collaborative effort that led to the realization of this role, I detail how other departments have filled-in some gaps before the role of an intimacy director existed. I specifically highlight the role of stage managers and costumers as a hub for emotional labor in the theatre and as individuals who have often had to advocate for consent and actor safety without the recognition, support, or training to do so.

Additionally, I place the intimacy director where they operate within the creative team and identify what responsibilities may have been unofficially established in other departments

that can be consolidated and streamlined through one professional. I dispel the myth that they are merely a punitive figure or an unofficial human resources representative. I will also offer answers to common questions surrounding the practical application of the role. These questions include what types of scenes may need an intimacy director, how often an intimacy director should be involved in the process, and the distinction between director, fight director, and intimacy director.

Finally, I advocate for training and certification of intimacy directors, calling on my work with Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (IDC), building a certification program for both intimacy directors and intimacy coordinators.

Chapter Two: Closure

The following four chapters dig into the practical application of intimacy direction by an intimacy director. They utilize Intimacy Directors International's foundational document, "The Pillars," as a framework for analyzing this position. In chapter two, I look closely at the pillar of closure as a tool for building healthy and sustainable acting practices for the promotion and prioritization of actor welfare.

Relying heavily on Sharon Carnicke's book *Stanislavsky in Focus*, I identify problematic through lines in acting history that encourage actors to call on their trauma to produce realistic acting. This normalized practice can cause, in some cases, irreparable harm to both the actor and their scene partner. The normalizing of actors without work/life boundaries creates a toxic environment that prioritizes the success of those who already have limited boundaries.

Particularly in scenes of intimacy, actors are incredibly vulnerable both emotionally and physically. Using Burgoyne's analysis of boundary-blurring between character and self, I

identify the need for closure and explore instances of harm that have happened when closure has not occurred. This chapter also offers practical closure applications using Tonia Sina's "Instant Chemistry" exercise and my work adapting the exercise for professional workshops. I advocate for closure as a method for preventing relationship blurring, in which character relationships affect personal relationships. Finally, I illustrate how closure can benefit others in the theatre, such as stage management or other technicians who repeatedly watch emotionally charged content. Intimacy direction supports the healthy separation of work and personal life for the promotion of sustainable art-making.

Chapter Three: Consent

As a pillar of intimacy direction, consent is critical to the construction of intimacy choreography. This chapter examines how the intimacy director can inject space for consent, where there has previously been none. This section will lean heavily on Planned Parenthood's definition of consent and explore how current theatrical power structures interfere with an actor's ability to give consent. Planned Parenthood uses the acronym FRIES to define consent: freely given, reversible, informed, enthusiastic, and specific. These qualifications help to increase the understanding of consent beyond a simple yes or no answer. It identifies the invisible structures at play when considering consent and personal agency. This definition of consent is widely used when educating the public on incorporating consent in their personal lives, both sexual and otherwise.

When taking this to performance industries, I offer answers to the questions: At what point does an actor give consent? How can actor consent be revoked? Can consent be assumed during auditions? Where are the lines between character consent and actor consent? Is there a

place for improvisation in intimacy work? Where do trust and implied consent fit in with intimacy direction? By thinking about consent as a dynamic but practical concept, all creative team members can be advocates and collaborators in consensual working.

Chapter Four: Communication

Through an analysis of the pillar of communication, I offer language that helps create safer rehearsal spaces. The ways we talk about boundaries directly informs how collaboration can happen in the space. The intimacy director is a skilled communicator and utilizes language to combat cultural stigma around the discussion of sex and intimacy. In this chapter, I detail the cultural context of shame that often surrounds discussions of human sexuality and offer tools that the intimacy director, actors, and director can all use to better communicate with one another.

Examining the intimacy director's practical collaboration, I specifically investigate Ben E Benjamin and Cherie Sohnen Moe's Assertion sequence as found within their book *The Ethics of Touch*, as a method for boundary establishment and maintenance throughout a production. Additionally, I argue that simple language changes can promote widespread change in how we think about artistic growth by distinguishing between uncomfortable and unsafe. This example illustrates a tool for encouraging collaborators to be active contributors to their artistic growth process.

Chapter Five: Context and Communication

In this final chapter, I combine my analysis of the remaining two pillars of intimacy direction. Context, as a distinct pillar, invites us to explore the impermanent nature of intimacy

direction methodology. It asks that all practitioners consider the intersectionality of identities that interact with intimate scene work. There is no singular best practice for intimacy direction and no magic recipe for consent. By investigating context as an active part of the creative process, artists can create opportunities for true collaboration and consent agreements.

The context of the piece directly affects the type of choreography that best serves the story. By taking into account not only the context of the story, but the context of the actors, cultural and political environment, and design choices, the intimacy director can construct impactful choreography that serves the story while also prioritizing the safety of all artists involved in the piece.

This chapter offers some choreographic considerations for intimacy directors and tools to better understand choreography, not as a firm and rigid physical script, but as a helpful framework that invites freedom, exploration, and consensual working.

Conclusion

Intimacy direction is expanding rapidly and has already become a moderately well-known term within the entertainment industry. This project began just as intimacy direction started to receive widespread media attention, and before intimacy coordination had been established as an independent area of study. The growth of these roles within the industry will likely mean that pieces of this dissertation will become quickly out of date. New organizations are being created to meet the demand for this work. Theatrical intimacy practitioners are working to rapidly produce the most up-to-date protocols and respond to the industry's needs as they become evident during this integration process. I look forward to the day in which intimacy directors and coordinators are as prominent as dance choreographers and lighting designers and

imagine a world in which consent becomes far more centralized in all aspects of storytelling and entertainment.

CHAPTER 1: THE ROLE OF THE INTIMACY DIRECTOR

As mentioned in the introduction, the specific discipline of intimacy direction can be traced back to Tonia Sina's work during her years in graduate school at Virginia Commonwealth University in 2006. Sina is largely acknowledged as the first to fully realize the position as its own distinct specialty and advocate for its usage widely amongst theatre practitioners. Throughout her professional career, she inspired others to begin exploring their own relationship to the discipline and specialty. Through a spiderweb of influence and staunch advocates, the position gained moderate prominence between 2006 and early 2017 with prominent theatres beginning to explore the title, often as an added responsibility to the fight director.²¹ However, it was *The New York Times* coverage of her work as intimacy director at the Stratford Festival in 2017 that sparked widespread conversation about the role in American Theatre and is noted as one of the watershed moments in the history of this work. This, in combination with a variety of other social movements, such as the #metoo movement, Black Lives Matter movement, and #TimesUp movement, among others, set the stage for intentional conversations surrounding the wide-spread implementation of the role. Since then, this role has, and continues to influence a

²¹ Steppenwolf Theatre in Chicago's 2016 production of *The Burials* lists Rachel Flesher in the program as being the "Violence and Intimacy Director." On the website, she is only listed as the Fight Choreographer. This is an example of the incongruities of the discipline and its struggle for recognition and validity as early as 2016.

wide variety of artistic disciplines, including theatre, tv and film, dance,²² still photography,²³ opera,²⁴ and the music industry.²⁵

This rapid adoption of the position has left gaps in the public knowledge and understanding of this role and how it integrates into the scaffolding of American entertainment. This lack of common knowledge or consensus has led to fear of the unknown in some places and has produced resistance to the role in others. In this chapter, I argue that the role of the intimacy director is its own distinct position and defend against the idea that intimacy direction can be performed by anyone. I argue that this emerging role has the ability to radically alter dangerous, coercive power structures that have existed for so long within the creative industries and redefine our industry's understanding of consent and how it functions both in the rehearsal room and

²² Sarah Lozoff is currently pioneering intimacy direction as a specialty within dance through her work with American Ballet Theatre and RUDDUR Dance.

²³ In 2019, I coordinated the intimacy and developed protocols for use on the set of Playboy magazine condoms advertisement photoshoot. Additionally, Mackenzie Lawrence of Intimacy Coordinators Canada has continued to pioneer these methods for still photography.

²⁴ Prominent pioneers of intimacy direction for Opera include Adam Noble and his work at the Houston Opera, Tonia Sina and her work at Lyric Opera in Chicago, and Doug Scholz-Carlson and his work at Minnesota Opera. Additionally, Tonia Sina and Doug Scholz-Carlson presented a workshop on intimacy direction for the Metropolitan Opera and OPERA America in 2019.

²⁵ Beyond intimacy coordinating music videos, I am currently collaborating on a project meant to expand consent education for A-list musicians. This project is scheduled to launch sometime in 2021.

during performance. Additionally, by creating intimacy direction as its own independent artistic discipline, those who practice it can leverage focus and specialization to promote better storytelling and offer expertise to support high-risk storytelling without distraction.

In order to analyze the radical potential of intimacy direction, I will build a theoretical framework for discussing concepts of power and consent incorporating John French and Bertram Raven's Five Bases of Power, along with Sophie Hennekam and Dawn Bennett's work, *Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries: Tolerance, Culture and the Need for Change*, as touchstones for understanding how intimacy direction can confront systematically supported sexual harassment during the production of intimate scenes. Finally, I offer examples of how the intimacy director integrates into the artistic process and production team for the support of the entire production.

A Practical Vocabulary of Power

Eric Liu, a prominent power theorist, defines power as the “ability to make others do what you would have them do.”²⁶ Power affects every aspect of society and how and why intimacy direction has been practiced and developed. Due to the complexities of power theories, I have, in practice, relied on models of power that are simple to understand and can be quickly and easily communicated in a rehearsal room for the purpose of providing a vocabulary of power that theatre practitioners can use to begin their own investigation. I favor theories that may be over-simplified due to their ability to quickly create a language that is accessible to those who

²⁶ Liu, “How to Understand Power.”

are looking to examine power within production and begin to name their own relationship to power.

Power is not inherently bad, and it is also not inherently good. However, when power is ignored or erased, this can lead to gaslighting and coercion. Gaslighting occurs when someone is told that their experience or reality is not true or valid for the purpose of maintaining power. An example of this can be seen in the narrative around sexual assault victims who are asked why they didn't just walk away. Questions like this that imply that systems of power don't exist can exacerbate trauma experienced by victims while simultaneously causing them to question their own reality. Gaslighting also occurs when someone refuses to believe a victim due to their relationship with the perpetrator. In these cases, because they couldn't imagine a world in which their friend commits this action, the action is deemed to not have happened. The naming and identification of lines of power create opportunities to mitigate their negative effects and work collaboratively and consensually in the space.

John French and Bertram Raven in their work *The Bases of Social Power*, propose five (and later add a sixth) social bases of power that help to identify where power lives and how it affects our society.²⁷ These bases are: legitimate, expert, reward, coercive, referent, and information power. While these bases can provide a helpful foundation for power analysis, I find a distinct lack of nuanced thought with regard to racial, gender, and ableist dynamics. Their work implies that there is a neutral body and that these bases of power are equally accessible. Despite this, I have found that their language creates an entry point to have a conversation about how power affects our ability to work in the rehearsal. Using Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional

²⁷ French and Raven, "The Bases of Social Power."

framework and Minnesota Collaborative Anti-Racism Initiative's definition of Systemic power to complicate French and Raven's theories, I argue that they can still be applied in a more helpful and nuanced way as tools for analyzing systems of power.

Kimberlé Crenshaw first coined the term intersectionality in 1989 as a tool for exploring compounding systems of oppression. Although the term's usage has expanded well beyond her intention, she argues that it remains a "a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other."²⁸ These compounding systems of oppression are further amplified through a definition of systemic power. The Minnesota Collaborative Anti-Racism Initiative (MCARI) defines systemic power as "the legitimate/legal ability to access and control those institutions sanctioned by the state."²⁹ This definition of Systemic power allows the MCRI to shape the conversation about power as it is greatly affected by the intersectional identities of those who are in relationship with it. They identify that in the United States, the vast majority of systems are built to uplift and support exclusively white society, and that the systemic power is not simply a layering of additions, but a multiplication of power over individuals or are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color as well as other marginalized groups. Crenshaw also offers that the effects of oppression are non-linear, arguing that "we tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What's often missing is how some people are subject to all of

²⁸ Crenshaw and Steinmetz, She Coined the Term 'Intersectionality' Over 30 Years Ago. Here's What It Means to Her Today.

²⁹ MCARI, "Systemic Power and Race."

these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts.”³⁰ White supremacy is an example of an ideology that mobilizes systemic power. It has mobilized systemic power in an attempt to consolidate power amongst a small group of individuals. Systemic power and white supremacy limit the imagination of who can pose or utilize various forms of power. In the last months of writing this dissertation, the murders of George Floyd, Ahmoud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and Tony McDade, among others, by the police have given way to a national spotlight on the Black Lives Matter movement among other racial justice movements. Now, more than ever, it is imperative that the discussion of power involve the complex analysis of intersectional identities. Racial inequities and white supremacy permeate many entertainment spaces, and the inclusion of this analysis is critical to fully advocate for all artists.

The first of French and Raven’s bases of power is Legitimate power. Legitimate power comes from a specific title or position, i.e. the director, producer or stage manager. It is used to direct inquiries and ensure a system of hierarchy in which the director has final artistic say over the production. The title of “director” alone creates power within the room. It is generally the first form of power that people can identify; however, when it is the *only* form of power that is identified, it limits our ability to create solutions to problems that extend beyond the boundaries of where those titles are relevant.

However, legitimate power is not inherently accessible to anyone holding a title. In dominant American culture, certain bodies are perceived as being allowed to possess certain titles. In her book, *I’m Still Here: Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, Austin

³⁰ Crenshaw and Steinmetz, She Coined the Term ‘Intersectionality’ Over 30 Years Ago. Here’s What It Means to Her Today.

Channing Brown – a Black woman – recounts tale after tale of people being surprised to hear that she is the director of her program. She is repeatedly asked who is *really* in charge and has to work to prove that she has the legitimate power that her title would suggest.³¹ Brown's book offers just one example of how the systemic nature of white supremacy affects Black women's access to legitimate power in predominantly white spaces.

Expert power, as defined by French and Raven, stems from the belief that someone is an expert on a specific topic. In the workshops that I conduct, I am often perceived, as the expert in the room on intimacy direction. When I ask participants to sit or stand, they do so, because they believe that I have a pedagogical reasoning. This power can manifest in consultants who are specialists, whose power comes from their expertise in the crafting particular stories or who bring additional knowledge to the room, or perhaps from an actor who may have additional knowledge on a topic which affords them extra power over the creative direction of the scene. In academic settings, an example is found in upperclassmen or graduate students who work with undergraduate students. Typically, those with less expertise trust that the more experienced student has an expertise that is guiding their decision making. Expertise can be validated in a number of ways, through certification, through experience, through referral from another trusted source, through degrees, and even through confidence. It can also be invalidated easily. Marginalized populations are often required to prove their expertise more so than other groups depending on the makeup of the group to which the perceived expert is speaking. Agism, sexism, racism, ableism, and classism can drastically impact someone's access to expert power.

³¹ Brown, *I'm Still Here*.

Reward power can be found in those who are able to reward others when they meet certain expectations. This can come in the form of extra lines during new play development or in those who can offer someone a raise or a chance to be hired next production. As an example, casting directors hold a great deal of reward power. In academia, professors are able to award high grades, letters of recommendation, and can influence casting decisions for department productions. Many theatre practitioners take on multiple roles, so the director for one production may be the artistic producer for another project. These dual relationships make reward power even more complex. When a student does well on their assignment and completes the requirements, they are rewarded with a valuable letter grade. Rewards can reinforce desired behavior and contribute to the culture of a space. Systemically, the consolidation of wealth in America for white people by means of slavery, Jim Crow laws, red-lining, mass incarceration, and inherited wealth (among others) amplifies reward power. This example highlights the imbalance in power, and how resources are distributed. We see this play out in theatrical spaces when looking at the demographics of producers, directors, and donors. This affects how performances are chosen, whose work is selected to be produced, and who is hired, and is compounded over time.

Coercive power is the opposite of reward power. Many of my colleagues have begun to substitute the term “Punitive Power.” It is present when a certain person is able to create a negative consequence for certain actions. The ability to reduce pay is an example of punitive power. In academia, the power to fail someone, or lower their grade can be mobilized in a number of ways in order to achieve the desired results. Systemic power impacts this dynamic when taking into consideration the identities of who upholds the decision of the person with punitive power. There are numerous cases in academia in which a teacher delivers a poor grade,

and the student is able to receive an adjustment because their parents, academic advisors, or department heads side with them. This can happen for a number of reasons, some of which may include financial donations, racial makeup, or historical participation in the department. This situation is mirrored in production, when someone may not be able to seek punitive action due to the fact that the person who committed the infraction has more power or resources than they do. In these cases, punitive power may be mobilized to silence victims, as the perpetrator will have them fired, should they speak out. This again is affected greatly by the intersectional identities of those in each situation.

Referent power is the power of charisma and likeability, and has been extended to include the ability to cultivate a powerful network of associates and colleagues.³² Those who hold referent power are then seen as being able to give referrals that bolster someone's position within the industry which can translate to money or social capital. Referent power is used to share recommendations of excellent professionals and can be used to help discover new talent. It can be the big break for an early career artist or can support what otherwise may look like a risky investment. In entertainment, this often in the form of stardom, in which we perceive that someone may have connections higher in the industry. Many of the actors who engage in non-equity theatre do so in order to build a network of people who will call upon them for future jobs. The homogeneity of some social groups within entertainment can mean it is exceptionally difficult for actors of color or other less represented groups to break into those spaces. The reliance on references increases this power differential greatly.

³² French and Raven, "The Bases of Social Power."

The last base of power, information power, was identified by Raven in 1965.

Informational power occurs when someone has more information about a certain situation. An example of information power in the entertainment industry: a producer knows exactly what the director is looking for in an audition which allows them to affect the results of the audition. Stage managers often have a great deal of information power. One of the unique qualities of information power is that it is gone the moment the information is shared; however, in an industry that is founded on secrecy, big reveals, and side projects, it is still exceptionally powerful.

Using this language as a framework, individuals can identify ways that they interact with power, how they hold it, how they mobilize it – knowingly or unknowingly. This model invites ways of thinking about power as connected to personal relationship rather than something abstract and outside of themselves, or something that is inherently malicious or abusive. With these concepts as an entry point, we can begin to investigate how power can be mobilized to promote equity and explore ways to redistribute power in a room. The pervasive narrative of “pull yourself up by the bootstraps” does little to acknowledge the systemic power structures that affect someone’s ability to find success or agency. By engaging in regular analysis of power, these systems become harder to ignore.

When speaking about power to groups of practitioners, I have had a few participants respond that they could see how all of these types of power applied to themselves, but that they actively chose not to use them. This response is generally attempted to distance oneself from the nefarious and manipulative uses of power and is often given under the assumption that to actively use any of these powers is abusive, or inherently bad. However, not all power is used for nefarious reasons. These bases of power, as described by French and Raven, and adapted by

myself and my colleagues, are not tools or weapons that need to be actively wielded. They are always working whether or not someone is consciously attempting to use them. To be a director is to engage in a certain narrative of what a director is, and that narrative affects how others respond to your title. It doesn't matter how charismatic and friendly the director is, they are operating under a certain set of understood systems of power.

These bases of power can interplay and combine, often placing all of the pressure on the individual with less power to deftly navigate difficult situations while reinforcing that those in power should not have to participate in that conversation. This mindset relies on the erasure of personal resistance and precautions claiming that any objection to the set course is problematic or "being difficult." It instills fear and promotes subservience. Worse, it does so under the guise of collaboration. It is often heard that the opposite of a difficult actor is a collaborative actor. Collaborative actors are seen as those who are able to adapt to any situation, who say yes, and who are agreeable. When this term is mobilized in this way, it refers to an actor who simply never disagrees and who is "up for anything." However, collaboration is a term which, by definition, requires that all parties be fully empowered. This misuse of the term collaboration contributes to this narrative, which is particularly problematic when trying to navigate situations that require physical consent.

Power directly impacts our ability to give and withdraw consent due to the perceived negative consequences of our actions. These perceived negative consequences may be a fear of retaliation during a future project where the director refuses to hire the "difficult actor," or even that the actor may be replaced in the current project in which they are participating. When I ask collaborators to share any boundaries or needs that they have, it is most common to hear people say, "I have no boundaries," or, "you can do pretty much whatever." Knowing the current

discourse surrounding limitations and boundaries, this language is meant to communicate that they are eager to explore and collaborate with the group. However, in practice, these phrases are entirely unhelpful when trying to navigate a trusting partnership. We all have boundaries.

Socially and culturally there are invisible but understood guidelines that dictate acceptable behavior. These invisible rules govern where someone may choose to sit on a bus, how two people hug in a coffee shop, or how close someone stands in a conversation. When someone says that their partner “can do whatever they want,” generally they are under the impression that they share the same guidelines for acceptable behavior with the person with whom they are working. It is when this understanding of acceptable behavior is not communicated clearly and then does not match in practice, that problems can occur.

Most actors do not consent to being kicked in the face or being licked in the armpit. While these examples may seem extreme or silly, they illustrate the erasure of very tangible boundaries. By not stating one’s boundaries when working with a new scene partner, they impose the responsibility of avoiding those unnamed boundaries on their scene partner. Each partner works under the assumption that their understanding of acceptable behavior is the same as their partner’s understanding. The scene partner is then forced to either throw caution to the wind and attempt to guess their partners limitations correctly, or to proceed hyper-cautiously, checking in frequently to make sure that the actions were acceptable. In either case, when a boundary is crossed, it becomes increasingly more difficult to address it – as anything that would go against the phrase “I’m up for anything” is considered negative behavior for an actor. These systems of power silence the ability to ask for reasonable accommodation in the effort to produce the best artistic work possible, and the truth regime reinforces itself over time.

Power is often imagined as a zero-sum game in which it is impossible for all parties to win. It feeds off of the idea that individual freedoms are traded for protection, and it victimizes those who are perceived without power. Eric Liu offers that power is never stagnant. We are either acting or being acted upon. His work centers on the world of civics, offering that politics is the attempt to steer and control the flow of power, while policy locks in a particular flow of power.³³ This can be applied to the theatre as well, where the invitation of conversation, dialogue and, I argue, the use of an intimacy director can help to reshape the flow of power. Development of internal harassment policies, systems of reporting, and a commitment to bring in safety experts, such as a fight or intimacy director, can help to lock in a more equitable flow of power for the prevention of sexual harassment during intimate scene work.

Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries

The creative industries are known for being relatively unregulated compared to many other professions. For some, this demonstrates a type of upward mobility that is more accessible, and a culture that connects with those who are not interested in typical 9 to 5 jobs. In their piece, *Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries: Tolerance, Culture and the Need for Change*, Sophie Hennekam and Dawn Bennet analyze thirty-two interviews of women in creative industries and their experience with sexual harassment. In this piece, they identify that the “lack of regulation within these industries exacerbates both privilege and inequality” and argue that sexual harassment has been integrated as a normalized part of working in the creative industries. They go on to name four key factors that contribute to widespread harassment in the creative

³³ Liu, “How to Understand Power.”

industries compared to other industries. They are “competition for work; industry culture; gendered power relations; and the importance of informal networks.”³⁴ These factors, while not unique to the creative industries, interplay together in a unique way that makes these professions even more difficult to navigate.

It is only recently that the pervasive culture of normalized sexual harassment in the creative industries has received widespread media attention and many voices have joined together to protest the abusive treatment within the creative industries. The #TimesUp movement specifically addresses this imbalance in response to the charges against Harvey Weinstein.³⁵ By looking at the unique aspects of entertainment and other creative industries that give rise to great abuses of power with little to no checks or balances, we can begin to assess why this pervasive culture has remained dominant and how intimacy direction aims to disrupt and re-model the current working systems.

The importance of informal networks is known even to those outside the creative industries. Mainstream media has regularly included narratives of the creative industries where characters get their jobs by knowing someone who is already in the business. The common phrase “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know” is regularly associated with the creative industries. The majority of working actors have, at one point, had to perform in shows for only small stipends, in the hopes of fostering connections that could lead to more prestigious and better paying jobs. It is believed that the exposure or the connections to prominent industry

³⁴ Hennekam and Bennett, “Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries.”

³⁵ Weaver, “Golden Globes 2018: Black Dresses, Time’s Up Pins, Activist Plus Ones, and Everything Else You Need to Know | Vanity Fair.”

professionals are worth just as much, if not more, than money. This rhetoric has been used for decades to convince actors to perform for free or relatively low pay and has become an acceptable standard within the industry. It is common knowledge within the field that the chances of being brought onto a project are much higher if there is a pre-existing positive relationship with the director, producer, or the casting agent. For short-term or one-time projects, it is common for those in power to seek out someone who has a proven track record of quality work and who they know they get along with personally.

These informal networks affect how working artists interact with each other, not just in the workplace, but outside it as well. All social gatherings are affected by this need to cultivate and maintain a powerful network of friends and colleagues. Meeting someone at the bar or at a social gathering is often laced with the subtext that this connection could change the course of an early career professional's life.

The dominance of informal networks as a method for career advancement can have a particularly nefarious effect on those who are new to the industry or who are part of a marginalized group within the industry. During the Harvey Weinstein trial, multiple women came forward sharing their experience of coercion and assault in which they felt disempowered to walk away due to Weinstein's ability to influence their career.³⁶ Within the industry, it is understood that high-ranking members of the community often will sleep with or make sexual advances to those in perceived lower status. In these situations, predators often have a renewable source of fresh faces to sexually exploit, and the moment they don't want to keep someone around, they are able to remove them from this "inner circle." This narrative is not a new one for

³⁶ Marling, "Harvey Weinstein and the Economics of Consent."

Hollywood.³⁷ James Franco has been recently accused of operating one such harassment scheme in which he hosts a class about acting scenes of intimacy and uses his power and influence to groom young women into sleeping with him. These women report signing up for the class because of his connections to the industry and prestige as an actor.³⁸

The normalized reliance on informal networks remains a key factor as to why sexual harassment is so pervasive within the culture of the creative industries. In my workshops, this fear of losing access to someone's informal network by appearing to be disagreeable or rejecting advances has greatly affected participant's ability to say no, even within the context of a workshop game. This happens for a number of reasons, but one that is frequently voiced is that they are afraid that they won't be called on later in the game as a result of them saying no once before. This hesitation – which appears even in a game whose goal is to simply cross a circle – often stems from a common discourse within the theatre world where to be labeled as a “difficult actor” is an early death sentence for a career. Even the phrase “difficult actor” reinforces the notion that there are certain people in power who are able to decide whether the limitation expressed is reasonable or unreasonable. Structures of power are defined by how we talk about power and agency and are built and reinforced over time, creating a pervasive industry culture that accepts and validates these potentially problematic power structures and modifies our behavior to fit them accordingly.

Hennekam and Bennet identify “competition for work” as another key factor that increases the risk for sexual harassment in the creative industries. Actors are disempowered by

³⁷ Kantor and Twohey, “Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades.”

³⁸ Itzkoff, “2 Women Say James Franco's Acting School Sexually Exploited Them.”

the understanding that since there are large quantities of actors who want to work, no single actor is unique, and they are all easily replaced. A common phrase within the industry being, “If you won’t do it, there’s a line out the door of people who will.” In the context of supply and demand, this competition for work validates the poor treatment of early-career actors, even once they get a part. This strong competition for work empowers those who are already well established within the industry to set the standards for what is considered valuable or invaluable. It eliminates the need for compromise of those in power and instead demands that those wishing to enter this profession, mold to its predetermined standards.

The third factor, “learned industry culture,” can be seen prominently in how seasoned professionals talk to newer professionals. Common discourse involves phrases such as “that’s just the way it is,” or “we all had to go through it.”³⁹ There is a certain cultural honor to be a struggling artist for a period of time, and that struggle and mistreatment is normalized as an unchangeable part of the industry. This constructs a reality in which there is no use challenging that structure, because it always was that way and always will be that way. This ignores our capacity for change and growth and circulates power within the same groups as before. This is especially problematic when looking at the homogenous demographic of those who have been historically in power.

When looking at the discourse surrounding the word “No,” one can also find that certain populations are more likely to be penalized for its use than others. Men are often seen as assertive, or strong when they use no; however, women and particularly Black and other women of color who employ the word no are at a greater risk of being seen as aggressive, or non-

³⁹ Hennekam and Bennett, “Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries.”

collaborative, or even angry and “bitchy.” A relationship with the word “no” compounds over time and is greatly affected by cultural norms. For many, there is a need to quickly apologize for using the word “no” or a drive to justify its usage so that the recipient doesn’t take it personally. There are perceived negative consequences for many who use the word “no” and the process of mitigating those negative consequences is often more exhausting than simply saying “yes” instead. By accepting these dynamics as a part of the culture of creative industries, creatives are limited in their ability to imagine solutions for promoting equity.

“Gendered power relations” are the final factor as cited by Hennekham and Bennet. I introduce racism and ableism as additional factors that should be considered when investigating the homogeneity of those who hold power in the entertainment industries. These “gendered power relations” become heightened by informal networks in which those in power collaborate with one another in informal settings, and these informal settings become the staging ground for important professional work. Examples include locker rooms, cigar clubs, dinner parties, or other venues which value the homogeneity of their clients as a selling point.

These factors, as identified by Hennekham and Bennett, are not individually unique to the creative industries; however, they combine in a way that allows sexual harassment to be especially pervasive. These factors are often understood as a normalized part of the industry, rather than imagined as standards that can be challenged, named, and addressed. Often, the experience of harassment is blamed on the victim, due to the lack of acknowledgement of these factors. By spending time naming these factors, artists can imagine new solutions that work to prevent harassment and abuse within the creative industries.

Disrupting Normalized Systems of Power

Before the role of the intimacy director was introduced, many of the responsibilities that I now ascribe to the position were previously held, both formally and informally, amongst other departments. Stage Management, in particular, is a great example of a role that was regularly asked to hold emotional space for the production while also being tasked with running the show technically. As leaders in the rehearsal process, they are one of the few players that also have some power over the directors.⁴⁰ I have heard reports from stage managers who have called for breaks in order to check in with actors who look as though they may be going through trauma. Stage management has often been the ones to communicate with other departments the needs of a scene of intimacy so that they can work together to create a safe environment for the actors.

Costumers have also been key players for promoting actor safety. Costumers have been responsible for handling modesty garments or creating barriers for simulated sex though the consistency of usage has been debated. They are often the ones who actors will reveal that they are scared about one thing or another within the context of the scene. Customers can add useful slits or openings to clothing, help to navigate how to dress or undress someone effectively on stage, and are often the ones that hold robes backstage when an actor is performing nude. Due to the confidentiality and trust of the fitting room, costumers have been organically integrated as confidants and allies during scenes of intimacy.

⁴⁰ The abuse of power over the director by an intimacy director can lead to animosity between the artists rather than promote agency. The wielding of power over the director is seen as a last result and not as a sustainable tactic for consensual collaboration.

While I applaud the work that has been done, often unpaid, by these ally positions for a number of years, what makes the role of the intimacy director unique is that they have authority to directly address and make necessary changes to promote the safety of those involved. Costumers and Stage Managers generally have had to work in secret, or with subtle delicacy, ensuring that they are not seen as problem makers either and have had little to no training for the emotional stewardship aspects of their role. In some ways, they were also indoctrinated by a learned industry culture that said a good costumer was also a good listener. The intimacy director explicitly trains in conflict negotiation and mental health first aid – skills which generally don't take a prominent place in any other design curriculums. These skills have been seen as personality traits, or natural abilities that set someone apart as a good practitioner, rather than skills that can be learned, practiced, and enhanced. By having a specialist at hand, all parties are able to focus more specifically on their own job without fear that the actors will be losing an ally.

In traditional theatre spaces, the flow of power is perceived as very linear. The artistic director has power over the director who has power over the actors, etc. Directors can veto actor input, and have final say in all matters that are creative. However, the intimacy director is beholden first and foremost to the actors and has the power to veto the director's choice for the purposes of actor safety. This reversal of the previously linear system reshapes the way in which actors are able to have a voice and advocate for themselves within the creative process. While this may sound extreme, or a narrative of vetoes, it can actually be an incredibly collaborative dialogue between the actors, director, and intimacy director and invites more honesty and transparency, supporting the best work product possible. An intimacy director has the authority to say "no" to the director; however, a good intimacy director is someone who can do this gently and collaboratively, providing alternatives, and pivots to the situation in order to seek common

ground. The intimacy director celebrates the courageous and vulnerable communication of boundaries while working within those boundaries in order to reach an agreement on the physical storytelling.

For this to be effective, the intimacy director should also have experience as a movement artist or choreographer. They are there to help facilitate the directors vision using a more objective movement vocabulary that is founded in sexual dramaturgy. They can utilize clinical and clear language to help the actors understand the physical storytelling and enhance the illusions of simulated sex and other intimate acts. Through the creation of a common language of consent, choreography can help empower actors to enter the story more fully without risk of harming themselves or their scene partner(s).

I am often asked why we need the role specifically, and why we simply cannot target our efforts towards teaching directors how to handle scenes of intimacy better. I hear this in theatre, and I hear this in film. Intimacy choreography is not just an artistic design practice. When practiced correctly, it a radical act of advocacy that places consent and actor agency at the forefront of the process. Consent is based on the assumption that those entering into an agreement are on equal footing. However, rarely do we see this scenario practically. Power is always at play. Consent can only be freely given, and when one or more of the parties are operating under the intense power dynamics as outlined above, it becomes incredibly difficult to maintain this common ground. Regardless of how good the relationship is between the director and actors, there will always be power at play. The intimacy director creates space for consent to

be discussed, given, not given, or withdrawn freely and without consequences.⁴¹ The inclusion of an intimacy director in the process actively changes the discourse of how a rehearsal room should function and creates space for a new normalized culture to form, one which empowers more voices in the space to speak up to find creative solutions that are physically and psychologically safe.

Casting the Role of the Intimacy Director

In order to truly restructure the current systems of power, it is imperative that the intimacy director do their best to acknowledge and mitigate the systems of power that would inhibit honest and open communication between themselves and the actors. For instance, it can be extremely problematic for the artistic director of a theatre company to also serve as the production's intimacy director. This person will always be perceived as having the ability to grant rewards or punish those who do not fit their vision of collaboration. It is not the place of the intimacy director to judge what is collaborative and what is not, instead they are there to navigate through the given circumstance and provide options, solutions, and facilitate clear

⁴¹ It is worth noting here that there are some specific situations in which there may be negative consequences for withdrawing consent in the rehearsal or performance process. If an actor has agreed to tell the story of simulated sex and then withdraws that consent, regardless of reasonable accommodation or adaptation, there may be grounds for replacement or other resolution. However, even in situations such as these, the intimacy director can help facilitate the conversation to avoid rash or extreme decisions that villainize an actor's agency and victimize them further. I explore consent further in chapter three.

communication between the parties. I have personally made a point to remain separate from any casting practices as an intimacy director cannot have any hiring/firing capabilities. By remaining a neutral third party, there are fewer perceived negative consequences for sharing relevant safety information. As this role develops, its success demands the development of a code of ethics for the position as well – one that prioritizes the needs of the actor over the needs of the story and that creates space for actor confidentiality. This code is in support of a common goal of consensual storytelling.

In academia, the question of “who can act as an intimacy director” becomes more complicated. As professors begin to take on the role of the intimacy director, this discipline requires consideration of the unique systems of power found within actor training institutions. University professors and instructors wear many different hats. They are classroom instructors, production directors, industry professionals, and academic advisors. It would be impossible and impractical to remove all of these hats for the sake of one production, but these factors should be named and addressed at the beginning of a rehearsal. Students may be pressured into saying yes to something that they do not want to do if they feel that their grade is dependent on them saying yes. They may also be hoping for a letter of recommendation, or a job placement. Some universities also have policies about whether or not students are allowed to decline the roles into which they have been cast. All of these factors make consent very difficult to navigate in an academic setting.

One method for fostering active and informed consent is that the person who is in the role of the intimacy director utilize a confidentiality clause. This may help students feel that they are able to freely discuss their limitations without fear of that information leaking back to the

department⁴². Especially in a setting that may involve cuts in the program, students may be terrified to ask for accommodation, as it could be perceived as a sign of laziness or them being difficult. However, the burgeoning ethical code of intimacy direction prioritizes the safety of the actor first, and the intimacy director is often charged with finding a solution that doesn't disclose that the actor had a boundary in the first place. Furthermore, in academia, it may be advisable to have a faculty member who is not associated with that particular department production act as a mediator or advisor as necessary. This, in combination with student allies can provide multiple avenues for addressing reports of harassment or abuse⁴³. In the past, when these pathways are not clear, actors have either remained silent, quit, or found ally ship in other areas of the production.

Intimacy direction chooses to see each actor first as a human, to recognize that humanity of the actor and the needs that their body and mind may hold. The vocabulary of intimacy direction actively promotes differences in boundaries and carves out space for actors to imagine

⁴² Please note that the confidentiality agreement can only go so far in university policies. As many professors are also mandatory reporters, it should be made clear what type of information can remain confidential, and what kind of information would need to be reported under Title IX.

⁴³ Faculty regularly respond to these suggestions with a fear that students will begin to overuse their pathways of reporting, or that these methods stop students from learning self-advocacy, or they dampen a student's ability to learn their own conflict/resolution skills. History shows us a long line of abuse of power and harassment both in the professional world and in academia. I argue that it is better to have systems in place for the case that dangerous and coercive harassment is at hand, than sit silently for fear that a student may not be pushed as far artistically as their instructors may wish.

a world in which their needs can be met while still preserving the dignity and artistry of the story we have come together to tell. It is the radical act of placing the needs of the human above the immediate needs of the story and it trusts that there will be a way to tell the story viscerally and effectively in the end.

Intimacy Direction in Process

The integration of a common definition of the role of the intimacy director in contemporary theatre making is critical to the longevity of this position. Up to this point, I have discussed a great deal about how the intimacy director can help mitigate coercive power structures and clarify avenues of reporting. However, the intimacy director also offers valuable creative input. It is the combination of both roles inside this definition that gives this role the potential to radically re-shape contemporary theatre-making.

In the spring of 2018, my colleagues Terri Ciofalo and Zev Steinrock and I put together a student laboratory at the University of Illinois to answer the question: what does the addition of an intimacy director do to the theatrical staging process? As this role is so new, it is still undergoing development, and is therefore frequently met with skepticism and unease. By taking this theoretical role into practice, we aimed to better understand what this position could do for the creative process, where its limitations resided, and how we, as scholars, could better articulate this growing trend in professional theatre.

There is a prevalent fear that intimacy direction is an attempt to hyper-choreograph the most natural of moments, and that the results could never compete to the organic and improvisational approach that is currently used by many actors and directors. Directors worry that by involving a third party, the process will become slower, as it takes time to ask for consent

for every movement and touch. Additionally, many directors have expressed fear that the addition of an intimacy director is taking power away from the director. There is confusion as to how the hierarchy of creative power looks when an intimacy director is involved in the process.

The laboratory set up included two groups comprised of a director, an intimacy director and two actors. Additionally, there were six MFA stage management students participating in the lab. These students were exploring best practices for notating intimacy blocking and took extensive notes. Neither the directors nor the actors had worked with an intimacy director prior to this experience and they were only minimally familiar with the movement. Each director was assigned a short two-person scene containing intimacy and was then paired with an intimacy director and two actors.

Each of the two workshop groups were given one rehearsal outside of the laboratory setting. This 1.5-hour rehearsal was meant to accomplish two things: First, it gave a chance for all participants to ask questions about the intimacy direction process. As each group would only have about forty minutes to work on the scenes during the laboratory, this meeting was used to develop a common language among participants. Second, this time was used to go over the initial tablework and context for each of the two scenes.

This initial rehearsal was also meant to represent the part of the creative process before an intimacy choreographer is present. Both intimacy choreographers were present for this rehearsal, but only as observers. The directors were then asked to direct the scene (excluding the moments of physical intimacy) and/or conduct tablework so that the actors had a better understanding of the story and the direction of the scene. It was during this time that the directors also explained what the set would look like in a fully realized production of each script and made specific choices regarding rehearsal furniture and staging. Ideally, this preparatory work would

enable us to jump immediately into the intimacy choreography during a 45-minute workshop for each group.

Directors rarely work in the exact same way as one another, and an intimacy director adapts with the needs of the specific creative team. Director A was up on their feet and engaged with the actors during the first rehearsal in order to get the shape of the scene with the relevant dialogue. This director's goal was to create an active scene and mark the places where there would be intimacy. The actors were able to focus on the emotional state of the two characters without needing to address the physical intimacy yet. This director chose to mark the physical intimacy by saying "and then you would kiss" before moving on with the rest of the scene. Director B spent much of the first rehearsal conducting tablework. The director guided the actors through the emotions of the scene but abstained from asking them to touch until the second rehearsal. The actors were able to play with their breath and the reading of the scene, but they did not stage anything.

During the intimacy rehearsal, Director A, after having already staged the scene, save the intimacy, took a step back from the process and mostly observed as the intimacy director worked with the actors to create choreography. Periodically, the intimacy director would turn to the director and check in with them, asking for feedback and input. The director was then able to assess whether or not the scene was moving in a direction that fit their vision. The director offered suggestions when necessary, which the intimacy director was then able to translate into specific physical instructions. For example, one piece of feedback from the director explained that they wanted the first kiss to feel more passionate. The intimacy director was then able to ask the actors to increase the intensity of the breaths and magnify the pressure of their hands on each

other's arms and back. In this case, the intimacy director was working directly with the actors, while the director was physically further away.

Director B took a different approach. From the start of the rehearsal, this director wanted to play a much more active role in the choreography process. The intimacy director positioned themselves physically lower and a little further away and waited until their skills were necessary to the process. This director's approach was to improvise choreography, after having gone through the emotional context of the scene in the previous rehearsal. Before the first attempt at improvisation, the intimacy director stepped in to go over boundaries with the two actors. They set up some expectations about where the actors would feel confident being touched during this first round of the improvised scene. As the scene also involved simulated genital contact, the intimacy director was able to give them a specific direction for how to mark the intimacy for the purpose of rehearsal. In a later rehearsal, there may have been clothing removal or a genital barrier in place to protect the actor during simulated genital contact, so for the rehearsal, the goal was to create a place holder that allowed the actors to stay within the imaginary circumstances of the scene while representing the intended physicality. During the rehearsal, the director and the intimacy director worked together to set repeatable choreography that upheld the vision for the intimacy. In this situation, the intimacy director worked mostly as a translator, offering specific physical notes to the actors and checking in regularly and clarifying consent and physical boundaries for the work. The director focused on the character's experiences and tied their language directly to the story and the table work that they had done with the actors prior. In discussions after the workshop, this experience was compared to the role of a voice coach. The intimacy director did not fully direct the scene, rather, they helped the actors take the notes that the director was giving and emphasize certain relevant characteristics to the story.

In reflection, Director B acknowledged that they frequently lacked the vocabulary to describe how to fix intimacy that did not look quite right. When this happened in the past, their main tactic was to go over the character work again and again until the moment seemed better. For this director, the introduction of an intimacy director allowed them to articulate the aesthetic that they were looking for much more efficiently.

Director A reflected that, because the scene involved a few passionate kisses, they could have probably directed the scene just fine without an intimacy director, assuming that they had learned and understood some of the basic tenants of safe intimacy choreography. However, the director noted that the extra support in the room allowed them to take a step back and make sure that the intimacy actually matched the bigger picture of the show. Since the intimacy director was handling the issues surrounding consent, hand placement, and making sure that the actors were engaged and felt emotionally safe, the director was able to consider larger elements, such as lighting and sound, and stated that this would make the tech process easier, knowing that someone was specifically looking out for the actors during intimate scenes.

There is no one correct way for an intimacy director to be implemented into the creative process, assuming that the definition of the role remains constant. They are a flexible and dynamic role who should be able to adapt to the needs of the room. I have been in rooms where I have been asked to not interject with choreography unless absolutely necessary. In these cases, I think of myself as more of a safety officer, checking in every now and then with the actors, creating safe pathways for reporting, and being available should my skillset be needed. Sometimes, just the presence of an intimacy director is enough to put the room at ease. I have also been in rooms where I have been asked to take care of the whole scene. I have been called into rehearsals specifically on days when the director is out of town so that I can work with the

actors and they don't lose a full day of rehearsals due to the director's absence. In these cases, I work with the actors on my own, and check in with the director later to see if they have any notes or feedback to provide. The success of the role of the intimacy director requires a fixed set of protocols and ethics, but a flexible methodology for their implementation within the rehearsal room.

Fight Direction and Intimacy Direction

The role of the intimacy director is often placed in parallel to the role of the fight director. This provides an easy touchstone for most theatre practitioners and can help clarify how the intimacy director might work, what meetings they should attend, and when they should be involved in the rehearsal process. While this parallel is useful, these two roles are distinct, and each of the members of the creative team must be informed of the differences as well as the similarities in these roles. The intimacy director cannot do their job if they are unable to speak. They are a collaborative part of the creative process. I have been asked to attend rehearsals, but upon arrival have been asked to just sit in the audience and watch the rehearsal. Unless I am empowered to speak and present for the process of rehearsal, I will be unable to fulfill my role.

This job is not the "consent enforcement officer" or another extension of the HR department. Often this behavior comes from a fear that the intimacy director will overstep their lane and take too much creative and artistic license. This is something that can be clarified early in meetings between the director and intimacy director. By discussing how the director wants to operate in tandem with the intimacy director, they can both feel confident on where the intimacy director will be contributing and in what ways.

While I refer to a fight direction as a model to help conceptualize how an intimacy director functions, I want to be clear that the role of a fight director is different from that of an intimacy director. To explain this, I fall back to my distinction between intimacy director and intimacy choreographer. There have been many intimacy choreographers over time, and many fight directors have been asked to choreograph intimacy. In many situations, simulated intimacy operates on many of the same principles as simulated violence. Many fight directors are well positioned to design choreography for a piece of intimacy that accurately simulates intercourse on stage. Many of my colleagues have a history as fight directors, stunt coordinators, and violence designers; however, the role of the intimacy director is different than that of someone who choreographs intimacy. Intimacy direction as a discipline encompasses a burgeoning set of ethics and standards for what it means to safely and effectively choreograph intimacy. The recognition of intimacy direction as a role in the American theater is the acknowledgement that a new approach can have a dramatically profound effect on the physical and emotional safety of everyone in the entire production.

To be an intimacy director is to take on the responsibilities of navigating power dynamics, performer advocacy, and pushing forward this new standard for the choreography of heightened scenes of intimate physicality. The historical approach to fight direction has not emphasized or addressed these elements in the ways that this movement for intimacy direction has begun to do. Intimacy direction is not revolutionary because it creates a new system for masking simulated intimacy. It is not the physical technique that gives this work its historical significance. Intimacy direction is an approach, a standard, and a set of principles that govern and guide the creation of scenes of intimacy. It also has a unique emphasis on the understanding of historical trauma surrounding sexual content and intimate material and values process over

product. It also actively acknowledges that emotional danger is just as important to assess as physical danger.

The role of the intimacy and fight director are two separate roles and should be treated as such. If one person is performing the job of two people, they should be paid and credited accordingly. However, both violence and intimacy are specialties. Each takes time to research and understand fully in a way that enables honest and truthful storytelling. Fight directors spend years researching and perfecting the varying techniques for historical violence. They often pride themselves on knowing the difference between different types of swords and the methods for keeping them safe. So often in western culture, sex is imagined from a cisgender, heterosexual, white lens, often centered in the male gaze. The intimacy director is experienced in sexual dramaturgy and has researched and focused on how different bodies might experience intimacy or sexuality. It is not a universal experience, and the intimacy director is there to take this into account and offer a perspective of expertise in order to maximize the efficacy of the storytelling or find a consultant who can support authentic representation.

Many have told me that they have been doing intimacy direction for the past 20 years, but they didn't have a name for it. While I know that many have choreographed intimacy before the role of the intimacy director was popularized, I argue that intimacy direction as a field is relatively new and characterized not just by the choreographing of intimacy (which, while it has been done before, it should also be noted was not a widespread practice) but also by the depth of its sexual dramaturgy, and its relationship to power and consent.

When to Hire an Intimacy Director

There is still some confusion on when the intimacy director is necessary within the creative process. The word “intimacy” is rather vague. The Oxford English Dictionary defines intimacy as “pertaining to the inmost thoughts or euphemistically as “sexual intercourse,” among others. When specifically relating to theatre, they even define “intimate” as “of a theatrical performance, esp. a revue: that aims at establishing familiar and friendly relations with the audience. Also, of a theatre itself.”⁴⁴ While most often this role is spoken about in reference to explicit sexuality, something as seemingly simple as eye contact can be incredibly intimate. The entire theatre experience in one way or another could be defined as intimate. Intimacy implies vulnerability and invites practitioners to think carefully about what is intimate for them specifically.

An intimacy director is not needed for every scene that involves “intimacy” or physical contact, but there are some general guidelines that can be useful to determining if there should be an intimacy director in production. The following are scenarios in which it is best practice to have an intimacy director:

- 1) The show contains explicit nudity, simulated sex, or simulated genital contact of any kind (this includes consensual sexual stories as well as those of intimate or sexual violence)
- 2) There is prolonged and intense intimate physical contact that could be leading to implied simulated sex or other simulated genital contact
- 3) There is intimate physicality between two performers of varying power differentials (i.e. the director is also acting in the production, or a celebrity is working with a lesser known artist)

⁴⁴ “Intimate, Adj. and n.”

Apart from the scenarios outlined above, there are some other situations in which an intimacy director may be a valuable asset. Some examples include:

- When the director is uncomfortable with discussing intimacy.
- When the actors are having difficulty with their intimate body language that the director is unable to address.
- When the show involves minors, who may have to kiss, an intimacy director can help navigate this tricky space and provide tools for ensuring that all parties are safe and equipped with language about consent.

There are many situations in which the skill set of an intimacy director may be valuable, or a certain actor may require additional advocacy. When in doubt, a producer can hire an intimacy director and work with them on how they think they could benefit the production. I have been contacted before for scenes of intimacy that were seemingly simplistic, but someone on the team was in need of support. This can not only be actors, but producers, directors, and stage managers. In one such occasion, the production was utilizing actors under the age of 18, and they wanted them to feel that they had a support system. While not an explicitly sexual scene, I was able to offer advocacy, expertise, and creative support.

Many directors are incredibly comfortable handling scenes of intimacy, and in simple cases they may not need to hire an intimacy director. Just as some directors feel confident choreographing a punch, many directors are already equipped to handle a hug or a short kiss – especially after taking an introductory workshop on staging intimacy. However, in all of these cases it is still recommended to hire an intimacy director for those scenes of hyper exposed work (as outlined above) as the intimacy director is there to help navigate through some of the outlined power dynamics to ensure active and informed consent. Additionally, during tech week, and staging, they are able to keep focus on the safety of the scene of intimacy while the director is able to address the numerous other factors that go into making a production successful. A

specialist can be a great asset to the creative production, as they pull from a deep well of cultural and situational research that is meant to enhance the specificity of the physical storytelling. The expression of sexuality is a complex and nuanced field, and an intimacy director can help the cast make specific choices founded in the story, situation, and characters that is authentic and meaningful for the production. Intimacy direction is not meant to take away creative agency, but to enhance it.

Above are my suggestions for best practice on when to hire an intimacy director, though I do acknowledge that there may be a difference in what is best practice and what is available practice. In the absence of a fight director, one does not simply say “go ahead and punch each other.” In the absence of an intimacy director, I also recommend a creative and collaborative approach to creating safer intimacy choreography. Is there a way to mask the intimacy while the actors remain at a distance? Can lighting or costuming pull focus away from the simulated intimacy? I encourage productions to use tools that are available to safely navigate these scenes, rather than ignoring the potential risk for harm. As the stakes increase, productions should consider how and when an intimacy director might benefit the project, and if there is not an intimacy director available, they should consider whether or not it is ethical to produce the show in question.

If a production is utilizing an intimacy director, it is best practice to bring them on prior to auditions. They should be there at the first rehearsal to introduce themselves to the entire cast and crew. The intimacy director should be able to give a breakdown of how much time they will need to work on a specific project, this would involve number of rehearsals, any meetings they would like to have with the director or the cast members, as well as meetings with the costume department as necessary. In a production that involves complex intimacy choreography, the

intimacy director may need to be present for staging and spacing rehearsals during tech week and may attend regularly to ensure that they are there to adapt the choreography as the needs of the performers and the space adjust. In some situations, the intimacy director may only be there for a small part of one scene. If this is the case, they may only need to be at a rehearsal or two to set and clean up any choreography. The intimacy director is like any other specialist role, and their implementation will vary depending on the needs of the production. Open conversations regarding the needs of the production will allow all parties to do their best work.

The Professionalization of Intimacy Direction

In the past four years, the area of intimacy direction has changed dramatically and continues to adapt to the dynamic landscape of contemporary entertainment. Although the expansion of intimacy direction has been exponential in the last four years, there is still a long way to go towards establishing the professional role of the intimacy director as a mainstay in contemporary theatremaking. In his paper, *The Professionalization of Everyone?*, Harold L. Wilensky argues that the first step towards creating a new profession is “to start doing full time the thing that needs doing.”⁴⁵ Through this “doing” he argues that there becomes an established amount of knowledge about the profession. The number of full-time intimacy directors and/or coordinators has likely tripled since 2015, and their continued work and collaboration has led the development of a rapidly growing body of knowledge. This dissertation is, in part, a tool for documenting that body of knowledge for its continued implementation, critique, and exploration.

⁴⁵ Wilensky, “The Professionalization of Everyone?”

Harold Wilensky argues that the second step to professionalization is the establishment of training institution and methodology. The demand for this work is clearly present, especially since high-profile entertainment companies have made sweeping commitments to this position. In particular, when HBO made a commitment to placing an intimacy coordinator on every set that involved a scene of intimacy, they did so at a time where there were less than 5 certified intimacy coordinators with Intimacy Directors International. They brought on Alicia Rodis to not only place qualified artists, but to subsidize her efforts to train more individuals for the position.

The industry of intimacy direction is well on its way to establishing a standard of education. There are currently four major organizations seen as leaders within this industry: Intimacy Directors International (IDI), Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (IDC), Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE) and Intimacy Professionals Association (IPA).⁴⁶ However, none of these organizations have been around long enough to have a fully tested success rate as to what is needed to train future intimacy professionals.

The goals while building a training program with Intimacy Directors International in 2016 were to provide enough certified professionals to cover the demand as quickly as possible

⁴⁶ At the start of this dissertation, Intimacy Directors International was the only organization pioneering theatrical intimacy. Over the course of writing this dissertation, Theatrical Intimacy Education was formed, Intimacy Directors International closed its doors and many of the key players went on to create Intimacy Directors and Coordinators. Additionally, Intimacy Professionals Association, founded by Amanda Blumenthal, came into being. There are other organizations that have also come into existence, but I have chosen to limit this narrative to the organizations that are most widely recognized in the United States.

in an effort to maintain the integrity of the position. People had already begun to call themselves intimacy directors and coordinators without ever attending any kind of training. While this work does not claim that intimacy was never choreographed effectively before the term intimacy director became popularized, it does make an argument about how the role should operate in the room, a system of values that are upheld, and attempts to create a working definition and list of expectations for the role in order to have cohesive implementation across the entire entertainment industry. Additionally, as mentioned in the previous section, intimacy direction holds advocacy, mental health support, and consent as equally important to the choreographic responsibilities of the position. Many who sold themselves as intimacy professionals without receiving training were doing so in a way that either erased the advocacy and mental health components of the position or erased the choreographic expertise in favor of exclusively focusing on consent and advocacy.

In general, those who were more able to take a position of intimacy director were people who had been choreographers or movement directors in some capacity and had pre-existing relationships with certain theatres or entertainment companies. They were perceived to have the skillset to choreograph scenes of intimacy and help mask simulate sex the same way they might have choreographed and helped to mask scenes of violence. This became an important turning point in the understanding of this work, and organizations such as Intimacy Directors International began to fight and advocate for the distinct and separate art form that is intimacy direction. Maintaining a common definition of the work is critical to the positions ability to

professionalize. Wilensky argues that the establishment of a training institution reinforces the shared definitions and standards of working for the betterment of the profession as a whole.⁴⁷

To even be considered to fight direct on Broadway, one must have a resume that is filled with fight direction credits across the professional spectrum. However, the dramatic rise for the demand of intimacy professionals created a vacuum in which professionals did not necessarily need to have additional training in order to be considered for some of the highest and most prestigious theatre and tv and film spaces in the nation. People began reaching out to movement professionals they already knew and asked them to act as intimacy directors or coordinators without recognizing that the position may operate under an entirely different system of ethics or procedures. Untrained and inexperienced professionals continue to jump to the very top of the ladder. As an example – a producer at Netflix recently reached out to IDI asking to get their sex consultant certified for this job. They were not interested in a lengthy training; they simply desired the marker and designation quickly so as to be in compliance with having an intimacy coordinator on set.

To fill this vacuum, IDI opted to train established individuals from other artistic professions, mostly movement choreographers who demonstrated prior advocacy training, and certify them quickly across the nation so that there could be a resource in most of the major national theatre hubs that understood the integrity of this role. This meant that many of the first people who certified had under 60 contact hours with the leaders of the organization but were often chosen because their movement and care background demonstrated integrity, or simply that they had worked with one of the leaders of IDI in the past. This subjective standard served a

⁴⁷ Wilensky, “The Professionalization of Everyone?”

purpose but created a system that was based on favoritism and past knowledge and did not contribute to a comprehensive system of training for intimacy directors and coordinators.⁴⁸

As the CEO of Intimacy Directors and Coordinators, my colleagues and I have been working to build an extensive certification program that guarantees a level of knowledge and expertise for a role that is often seen as a department head and high-level position. We have built a four-level certification pathway that invites extensive study within this discipline. As of October 2020, there are only two organizations that offer certifications for intimacy professionals, IDC and Intimacy Professionals Association (IPA).⁴⁹ At IDC, we have created our system of training based on the following beliefs about any training program that offers a certification in intimacy direction/coordination. They include:

⁴⁸ Intimacy direction is not without a problematic influence of models of white supremacy and power dynamics. Many of the attendees at Intimacy Directors International's first choreographer's training were candidates who personally knew one of the facilitators. Additionally, this group was largely homogenous in its racial makeup, causing the first certified intimacy directors with Intimacy Directors International to be predominantly white. In the years, this misstep has been identified as an unchecked trickle-down effect of larger systemic racism in contemporary American theatre, where the homogenous groupings of white artists lead to informal networks that prioritized the success of white intimacy directors over BIPOC intimacy directors. There are many efforts in place currently to correct this misstep and repair the harm that continues to be done because of these early actions.

⁴⁹ IPA does not offer intimacy direction certification for live performance. They only offer Intimacy Coordination certification for TV and Film.

- 1) Substantial time commitment towards the study of this distinct discipline
- 2) Artist self-awareness
- 3) Mental Health First Aid Training
- 4) Extensive curriculum in cultural competency, trauma stewardship, consent and advocacy, and sexual dramaturgy
- 5) Movement education
- 6) General industry knowledge

I argue that a standard for certification should include, at *minimum*, 75 contact hours.

Most movement systems, yoga teacher certification included, ask for a minimum of 200 contact hours. While there is much of this work that can and should be discovered through reading and research, this work is experiential, and is best when taught as such. In the current COVID-19 world, in-person training is no longer feasible for the safety of both artists and instructors. IDC has turned to online education as a bridge until in-person training is available. However; online training cannot act as a full substitute for in-person work. A fully online intimacy curriculum would be unable to offer certain kinesthetic experiences of movement, consent, trauma, and interpersonal grounding.

One of the key indicators for whether or not an intimacy professional will be successful is their own level of self-awareness. This work is new, and many still find it threatening. Many times, those who practice it have a zeal for the good it can do and are quick to point out all the ways that it has gone wrong in the past. They may accidentally victimize and accuse during the rehearsal process which can create defensiveness and an unwillingness to collaborate. This is detrimental to the fundamental goals of the work. An intimacy director's self-awareness will allow them to understand how they come across in a specific environment. The bodies we teach

in affect our ability to use certain teaching tools. This work relies on being hyper vigilant about coercive and aggressive language, both of which could undermine the larger goals of the intimacy project.

As advocates, intimacy directors are knowledgeable about how different identities and intersectionality will affect actor safety. Theatre as a whole has needed to re-examine its relationship to whiteness and cultural competency, but intimacy directors in have an opportunity to integrate this into the very foundation of the work. A training in intimacy direction that does not centralize concerns of race is one that does a disservice to many of the most at-risk voices and may in fact continue to perpetuate the systems of power it claims to dismantle. Through the dismantling of white supremacy will there be greater sensitivity of ageism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and more. Race cannot be just an afterthought to the teaching of a movement form, it drastically affects the way we talk and teach. Instructors of this work require awareness of the different cultural stigmatizations around intimacy and the history of cultural trauma and violence that sexuality can often entail, and how consent can occur when working within these stories. Through an application of de-personalized sexual dramaturgy, and consent forward collaboration, intimacy directors are ably to create dynamic solutions to meet the needs of specific individuals during intimacy work and utilize trauma stewardship to provide tools for how to validate and support the individuals experience without taking it on themselves.⁵⁰

A training program for intimacy professionals emphasizes the needs of the specific industry that is integrating this work. To imagine that intimacy professionals are interchangeable between tv, film, theatre, improv, opera, dance, and more is to do a disservice to the nuances of

⁵⁰ I expand many of these concepts in the following chapters.

each area. Power works differently in each of these areas. Collaboration is understood differently in each of these fields as well. For the longevity and perpetuation of intimacy work, it is imperative that new professionals are reminded that most other people on set and in the rehearsal, room had to fight to get there. It is not to say that the intimacy professional does not also have to fight, but the fight looks different when there are so few intimacy professionals in this current moment. Humility allows the profession to incorporate techniques developed before the role was popularized and continue to be adaptable to the needs of each specific room. An intimacy professional listens to how each rehearsal room operates and resists the urge to dictate what must change under the guise of performer safety. Recommendations are well thought through and take into account the needs of all other members on the creative team. By seeking wisdom and guidance from established theatre practitioners, intimacy direction can improve and support current theatre practices without demonizing them.

Certification remains one of the standard ways by which someone can demonstrate exceptional knowledge in a field. At this point, certification can also help to discern the personalities that will or will not be successful in this work. Many of the areas described above are difficult to judge quantitatively. Some programs currently advocate that the number of training hours can demonstrate a level of expertise in a particular field; however, part of this work is highly subjective. Certification offers a set of standards that includes a subjective analysis/vetting. This subjective analysis is accompanied by a system of checks and balances but when done correctly helps to prevent someone from accruing hours while being unable to perform the work ethically in practice. The work required in this field is more than what can simply be outlined on a piece of paper, cv, or a resume. Certification offers a network of professionals who also state that this person upholds the ethics and integrity of the field and can

create a network of accountability that continues to advocate for professional excellence, less all the reputations of those certified be tarnished.

While supporting certification as a tool for standardizing training and defining intimacy direction for the purposes of professionalization, it is imperative that this industry confront the colonial ideologies at play. Edgar Villanueva, in his book *Decolonizing Wealth* helps to identify the fundamental worldview of indigenous people as “seek[ing] not to own or control, but to coexist with and steward the land and nonhuman forces of life.”⁵¹ To the opposite of this, a colonizer worldview advocates for “separation, correlates with fear, scarcity, and blame, all of which arise when we think we’re not together in this thing called life.”⁵² Intimacy coordination/direction cannot be successful when it slips into this us vs. them mentality in which different schools of intimacy direction attempt to monopolize the market or introduce false scarcity.

While I argue that these organizations benefit from a cohesive definition of the role of the intimacy director, there can and should be a multiplicity of perspectives as to methodologies for performing the role. Certification can help indicate a level of expertise, and encourage interprofessional accountability; however, it should not do so to the extent of ignoring accessibility and inclusion. As long as the definition of the role remains consistent, we can imagine alternate ways to identify excellence in this discipline in addition to certification that support a sustainable industry with a common definition and established working methods. These methods can include independent study and listing relevant trainings on a resume, and/or

⁵¹ Villanueva, Buffett, and Buffett, *Decolonizing Wealth*.

⁵² Villanueva, Buffett, and Buffett.

personal mentorship/apprenticeship. Working intimacy directors can also demonstrate a history of successful projects and include references that attest to their work. However, I emphasize that these methods can only work with a unified industry definition of the role, and its responsibilities.

While the area of intimacy is still relatively new, it is quickly working through Wilensky's final three steps for professionalization. Glimmers of a professional organization, Wilensky's third step, are seen currently in the intimacy coordination initiative within SAG-AFTRA. Led by Michelle Bennett, David White, Gabrielle Carteris, Alicia Rodis and Amanda Blumenthal, with input from over 30 working intimacy coordinators in the country (including myself), this intimacy coordination working group has established the SAG-AFTRA guidelines for working with intimacy coordinators, and is currently working on further projects to standardize the implementation and requirement of intimacy coordinators across all SAG-AFTRA sets.⁵³

Wilensky argues that the final two steps for professionalization are the establishment of laws that protect the profession along with a formalized code of ethics. While neither of these are yet widespread enough to claim completion, both are noticeably underway. In particular, IDC is working to create a code of ethics for intimacy professionals based in our company core values anti-racism, creativity, excellence, integrity, and sustainability. As the leading organization across entertainment, it is our responsibility to work to create this code of ethics for the establishment of the profession of intimacy direction.

⁵³ SAG-AFTRA, "SAG-AFTRA to Standardize Guidelines for Intimacy Coordinators."

Intimacy direction is itself a radical act. It has wide sweeping effects on much larger systems of power that are found in our performance production. To employ an intimacy director is to invite physical change into the rehearsal room and effectively create space where there has been little to none before. This industry change cannot be accomplished with simply more training for directors, although additional training for all theatre makers does help as consensual working.

The role of the intimacy director is critical to this work. Their presence during scenes of heighten exposure can actively inject space for consent where before it has been just out of reach. While intimacy direction is a discipline focused on the artistry and safe facilitation of scenes of intimacy, the effect that it can have on the rest of the rehearsal process is astounding. By utilizing language of consent and dismantling problematic systems of power, the ethical treatment of these scenes can promote a culture that can then pour into scenes that don't involve hyper exposed physicality. When respect is fostered within the work and all parties empower each other within the work, the effects can be seen outside the work as well. Intimacy direction and the intimacy director have the power to change the culture in which we live, far beyond one scene in one play.

CHAPTER 2: CLOSURE

Intimacy Directors International defines closure in their foundational document, “The Pillars,” as “a moment to leave our characters, relationships, and actions from the work behind, and walk back into our lives.”⁵⁴ With its emphasis on endings, the irony of beginning the analysis of intimacy direction with the pillar of closure is not lost on me. As I have continued working and practicing intimacy, I have broadened my definition of closure to encompass both opening and closing practices. I define closure as the practice of containing, processing, and categorizing the feelings and experiences that emerge during character work. It can go beyond script work, creating space to transition between the various roles that someone may play during the day: roommate, friend, character, lover, etc. It primes the practitioner for work and provides a release from the work, both physically and emotionally.

The investigation of closure or closing practices as a beneficial tool for actor training and performance has received a surprisingly small amount of investigation in the past few decades, though this is increasing. Only a handful of articles and publications in the last 25 years can be found that shed light on urgent questions regarding the potentially harmful impact of prominent acting techniques that glorify an absence of boundaries and blur the lines between self and character. Early research suggests that the presence or absence of closure practices may contribute to professionals' success and longevity within the entertainment industry. Despite this, closure practices have yet to fully penetrate the regular discourse surrounding the field and those who teach it. These topics remain in the shadows and are not being utilized to their full potential

⁵⁴ Intimacy Directors International, “The Pillars.”

as preventative techniques for sustainable performance. The call for an ethical overhaul of actor training and performance has continued to be overlooked by major training institutions and high-level professional theatres.

As the discipline of intimacy direction emerges as its distinct practice, there is an opportunity to model a new standard for ethical and safe practice and promote practitioner welfare as an integral part of creating effective and authentic scenes of intimacy. Closure as a concept exists well beyond scenes of intimacy, though due to the hyper-exposed nature of intimate scenes, it is a requirement for this type of work. To make a case for the value and importance of closure for actor wellness and safety, I will briefly outline the history of realistic acting in the United States that has led to potentially emotionally and physically damaging practices. Next, I define and explain closure and argue for the necessity of developing boundaries in somatic professions, such as acting. Finally, I offer examples of closure exercises that I have used as an intimacy director and Workshop facilitator that have been received well and have produced promising results both for myself and participants.

Realism in Acting: Manipulating but not Managing Emotions

The project of intimacy direction does not advocate for a specific acting methodology. Still, it recognizes the need to remain flexible to interplay with dominant contemporary acting theories to promote welfare and safety. However, some of the most normalized acting theories are laced with problematic practices that have contributed to a culture of actor harm. This culture is in direct opposition to the intimacy direction movement. The understanding of “acting” in America has remained fairly stagnant over the last sixty years and remains largely synonymous with psychological realism. Other acting styles are relegated to the shadows and dwarf in

comparison to the widespread acceptance of psychological realism as “acting.”⁵⁵ This is largely due to the misapplications of the work of Russian acting theorist Constantin Stanislavsky. Contemporary scholarship outlines a much more comprehensive history of acting and acting theory than what I present here; however, for this dissertation, I will focus specifically on the relationship between Constantin Stanislavsky and Lee Strasberg, their work of *The System* and *The Method*, respectively, and identify a pervasive public narrative of their lineage that is both inaccurate and highly impactful on contemporary understandings of acting. To do this, I rely heavily on Sharon Carnicke, an acclaimed Russian theatre and Stanislavsky scholar, and her book, *Stanislavsky in Focus*. Her three-part investigation explores the translation, transmission, and transformation of Stanislavsky’s acting theories and illustrates an America that was/is obsessed with the psychological aspects of acting theory and an Americanized figure of Stanislavsky that only vaguely resembles the historical acting theorist. She juxtaposes the work of Lee Strasberg and his darker psychological methodology with the more holistic approach that reflects Stanislavsky’s original intention. Her work, among others, such as scholar Jean Benedetti, lays the foundation for many of my arguments for how intimacy direction and more specifically, the pillar of closure intersect with contemporary acting theory, and how closure may offer some guidance as to how to answer calls to re-evaluate actor well-being, care, and ethical training and performance.

Carnicke describes the relationship between Stanislavsky and American actors as a “love affair” beginning in the 1920s.⁵⁶ This love affair, she argues, is one that has been inappropriately

⁵⁵ Baldwin, “Meyerhold’s Theatrical Biomechanics.”

⁵⁶ Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*.

labeled and mutated over the years. At a glance, Stanislavsky is credited widely as the grandfather of acting and is known for establishing psychological realism as a standard for contemporary acting in western theatre. Carnicke traces this lineage to demonstrate that Stanislavsky has been grossly mistranslated, and his ideas are misappropriated. In actuality, most of the credit for laying the foundation for actor training in America should go to the teachers from the Group Theatre and Actor's Studio in New York City.⁵⁷

While Stanislavsky's work may have lit an intellectual fire in America, his contributions to the profession after leaving America are regularly erased or obscured, creating a warped understanding of his acting theories and their practical application. Contemporary scholars, such as Jean Benedetti, have explored the factors that lead to the simplification of Stanislavsky's work. Benedetti, in her Routledge introduction to Stanislavsky, presents that his System was never meant to stand alone as a singular methodology for acting. The System was meant to be a tool for theoretical exploration and a means by which actors could access their craft in a multidimensional and adaptable way based on their specific needs.⁵⁸ Stanislavsky was afraid of being known for only one acting style, a fear intertwined with irony, considering his now dominant association with the singular form of psychological realism in America.⁵⁹

The misunderstood intellectual lineage between Stanislavsky and American Acting theorists is best highlighted through the popularization of Lee Strasberg, co-founder of the Group Theatre and founder of the Actors Studio, and creator of "The Method." Strasberg regularly

⁵⁷ Benedetti, *Stanislavski*.

⁵⁸ Benedetti.

⁵⁹ Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*.

cited and credited Stanislavsky as the source of his ideas and methodologies, both as an homage to his mentor and to lend Stanislavsky's credibility to his methodology. Carnicke asserts that this claim of direct intellectual lineage "robs Strasberg of the originality in his thinking, while simultaneously obscuring Stanislavsky's ideas" and set the trajectory for how Stanislavsky's work would be morphed and altered over time.⁶⁰

Lee Strasberg has become one of the most polarizing figures among acting theorists.⁶¹ He gained traction in the wake of Stanislavsky's visit to America in the 1920s and latched onto what he felt was the juiciest bit of Stanislavsky's teachings: affective memory. As Carnicke has uncovered, affective memory was only a small part of Stanislavsky's System, and even in that, he thought of it as a gentle guide rather than a method for breaking actors down emotionally to access locked emotions. Stanislavsky later rejected the dominance of affective memory in favor

⁶⁰ Carnicke.

⁶¹ While this dissertation focuses specifically on Lee Strasberg and The Method, due to his controversial teachings and their popularity in mainstream culture, it is worth noting that other acting scholars, such as Sanford Meisner and Stella Adler, also claimed to be utilizing Stanislavsky's teachings at the time, to different effect. They, among others, contributed to this obscuring of Stanislavsky's teachings, though they did not advocate for affective memory in the ways that Lee Strasberg did. They utilized the parts of Stanislavsky's teachings that best served their purpose, and either intentionally or unintentionally erased large swaths of Stanislavsky's ideas and distilled them down for the benefit of their own acting theories. This process continues to impact the understanding of Stanislavsky in America.

of a more holistic approach that invited influence from “Symbolism, Formalism, and Yoga.”⁶² However, these aspects played almost no part in the development of The Method, contributing to the misunderstanding of Stanislavsky’s overall teachings. Carnicke shares that “by the 1950s, The Method,” which was marketed as directly descendant from Stanislavsky’s teachings, “mirrored America’s obsession with the Freudian model of the mind by employing therapeutic techniques meant to free the inhibited actor from long-lived repressions.”⁶³ This obsession frames the development of American acting theory, erasing or overlooking almost anything that did not centralize acting’s psychological process.

As used within The Method, affective memory is the practice of using memories to generate an emotion similar to that of the character for a particular moment. The Affective Memory Exercise involves remembering the sensory details of a highly emotional memory to draw forth the memory and its accompanying emotion. Carnicke describes this process as “min[ing] personal experience in the creation of character.”⁶⁴ This process has been hotly debated whether this type of work can be done safely and responsibly, with some calling this practice therapy without a therapist’s license.⁶⁵ Strasberg did not shy away from the idea that his approach was steeped in psychology but never claimed to perform therapy explicitly. However, he was deeply concerned with the actor’s problems because he felt that they affected their ability to perform on stage. He would often probe an actors’ personal life to access their most intimate

⁶² Carnicke.

⁶³ Carnicke.

⁶⁴ Carnicke.

⁶⁵ Barton, “Therapy and Actor Training.”

feelings as a technique for producing better acting. He promoted that “actors must confront their deepest fears as they learn to act... because these fears arouse their most powerful reactions.”⁶⁶ Using an association with Stanislavsky’s teachings to bolster its credibility, Strasberg's Method became a mainstay for actor training at the Actors Studio, bringing it from relative obscurity to a normalized methodology for actors in America, one that is still taught regularly today.⁶⁷

In her dissertation, *Acknowledging Trauma/Rethinking Affective Memory*, Cheryl Kennedy McFarren argues that actor training programs should seriously investigate the ethical implications of affective memory and the Affective Memory Exercise on students and acknowledge its potential for harm. In her dissertation, she offers her own experience of the affective memory exercise during actor training:

“[The teacher] told me to recall the worst thing anyone had ever said to me. When I identified this for myself, he had me recall the sensory details of the moment at which this thing was said and each facial feature of the person who said it. He then instructed me to substitute the face of the original speaker for every face in the tribunal audience. He asked me to hear the tribunal chanting these words. Once his prompts had summoned large enough emotion in me, emotion he felt was analogous to what Hermione felt at this moment in the play, I added Shakespeare’s words. I vividly remember how I felt at the end of this exercise, though it has now been two decades since this event took place: I was overwhelmed by emotion, profoundly agitated by my all too vivid recollection of what was said to me and the power of the imaginary tribunal chanting back at me. Not knowing any better, I had willingly gone with my guide into this troubling place and called up for myself the intense and frightening powerlessness that I had felt – for real – when I had originally heard these words. Recalling potent sensory images tapped profound emotion over which I had no control.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*.

⁶⁷ Baldwin, “Meyerhold’s Theatrical Biomechanics.”

⁶⁸ McFarren, “Acknowledging Trauma/Rethinking Affective Memory.”

In this example, she describes the recall of sensory details and the process of mining a personal traumatic memory for the purposes of performance. She identifies a profound sense of powerlessness and lack of control due to this technique, something for which she was neither prepared nor expecting. McFarren goes on to describe the breach in trust that she felt with her teacher, who had led her unknowingly to this place of trauma, and questions the ethics of failing to provide her with the appropriate tools to care for herself after the experience, and the expectation that she repeat this experience every time she performs this particular piece of theatre. McFarren was asked to manipulate her own emotions without instructions for managing them once they were present and real. This example also highlights the one-sided nature of this exploration, noting that success was only found when the instructor felt that the emotions were analogous to those felt by the character in the play. This power imbalance can create fertile ground for abuse, especially due to the glorification of guru style teachers, who are perceived to have the power to make or break a career.⁶⁹

While the ethical basis of the Method continues to be hotly debated, it has, without a doubt, become a normalized part of American acting and American popular culture. This is largely due to its credit as a successful for cinema in the 1950s. Successful actors openly discussed the technique, which allowed it to cross over from an obscure part acting school to a

⁶⁹ The prevalence of guru style teachers who have abused their power through the manipulation and subsequent of abuse of early career actors can be found again and again throughout theatre history. Daryl Cox, subject of the Profiles Theatre incident in Chicago is a great example of how this type of psychological process can be used to take advantage of individuals who may not yet understand the impact of these techniques.

defining characteristic of successful American actors. Carnicke cites its presence in mainstream entertainment culture as evidence that it was more than an obscure technique - though it continued to be mislabeled as a demonstration of Stanislavsky's teachings. Carnicke offers examples including the movie *Tootsie*, the musical *A Chorus Line*, and the popular TV Show *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The existence of these parodies "testif[ies] to how thoroughly Stanislavsky has entered into the general discourse. Audiences do not have to be theatre specialists to get the joke."⁷⁰ The Method, and its direct descendants, remains a dominant pedagogy today in acting schools and the professional environment. In their work *Toward Revising Undergraduate Theatre Education*, Peter Zazzali and Jean Klein assert that the basic framework of undergraduate theatre programs has looked roughly the same for the past thirty or forty years and that teachers are generally recycling what they were taught in the ways that they were taught it. This also creates a system in which abuse can be obscured as wisdom, where problematic and harmful acting practices are passed on through generations, caught within a cycle of abuse. Zazzali and Klein add that there is often an infusion of new technology, but this technology has not shaped the basic pedagogy.⁷¹

During his investigation of acting pedagogy, Mark Seton, in his piece, '*Post-Dramatic Stress: Negotiating Vulnerability for Performance*', observes that contemporary acting theory continues to valorize radical vulnerability and asks actors to affect and be affected by one another both within the confines of the scenes and as colleagues. Many of the acting exercises used today are not framed from the perspective of the characters. They are still instead framed as

⁷⁰ Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*.

⁷¹ Zazzali and Klein, "Toward Revising Undergraduate Theatre Education."

exercises of personal exploration and understanding to remove the emotional barriers preventing successful acting, much like the affective memory exercise. Seton observes that “The greatest accolades given to actors is often those of bravery’ and ‘risk-taking,’ rather than that of technical competency. We admire actors who appear to (or may claim to) ‘lose themselves’ in a role or who ‘expose’ themselves through their vulnerable portrayals.”⁷²

This narrative is echoed through popular media, which often highlights actors for their extreme commitment to the role, risking mental and physical health to completely embody their character or a new personality while also glorifying the risqué nature of the risks associated with these techniques. A recent example of this vicious duality occurred during a recent celebrity interview of Robert Pattinson by Jennifer Lopez, published in *Variety*. Pattinson condemned the usage of this technique as a scapegoat for acting inappropriately on set as one “only ever see[s] people do the Method when they’re playing a-holes.”⁷³ However, in the same article, Pattinson goes on to discuss a co-worker who uses the Method and describes their ability to stay in character for the duration of the work as “impressive,” presenting The Method as an elusive and lustrous technique that pits high stakes against high rewards.⁷⁴

Beyond staying in character for an extended period, examples of this technique can also include dramatic weight change as well as intentionally altering their thought processes. The media glorifies extreme dedication and the suffering of the artist for the role. In an interview

⁷² Seton, “‘Post-Dramatic’ Stress.”

⁷³ Chernov, “Robert Pattinson: Actors Only Go Method When They’re Playing A-Holes – *Variety*.”

⁷⁴ Chernov.

regarding the recent film *Suicide Squad*, Director David Ayer told *Yahoo UK* that he prioritized the actors getting to know each other as humans almost more than as the characters. He asked the actors to talk about their “lives, their history, and really got them to open up as people to each other. [Ayer] also...had them fight each other,” explaining that “You learn a lot about who a person really is when you punch them in the face. It gets rid of a lot of the actor stuff.”⁷⁵ This recent example demonstrates the relative normalization of actors performing acts of physical violence against one another in the pursuit of their role. This practice would be almost impossible to imagine in any other professional working environment. This interview was later condemned in a scathing article in *The Atlantic*, which notes that The Method is tied to “a brand of identity politics that tries to make the art form resemble more traditional forms of male labor, and by extension limiting the kinds of actors who receive praise.”⁷⁶ The next sentence proceeds to tie Stanislavsky to the Method, which furthers the argument that this incorrect lineage remains intact within contemporary culture.

Beyond physical changes and risks, actors also receive ample media attention for the depth of their psychological and emotional exploration of the character. The most infamous example of this is Heath Ledger while playing the Joker in *The Dark Knight*. In preparation for this role, he locked himself away in a hotel room for a month and journaled incessantly in an attempt to change his thinking patterns to better understand his character.⁷⁷ Contemporary psychology recognizes that prolonged isolation can have serious consequences for mental health;

⁷⁵ Ashurst, “Suicide Squad.”

⁷⁶ Bastián, “Hollywood Has Ruined Method Acting.”

⁷⁷ New York Film Academy, “Deeper Into The Method.”

however, these dangerous techniques continue to receive sensationalized reporting that paints a glorified picture of a “true” artist who suffers in dedication to the craft, framing it as a perilous but noble quest, rather than an unnecessarily dangerous undertaking. Deborah Margolin, an associate professor at Yale, describes this phenomenon as the “romanticizing of trauma.”⁷⁸ Actors can become enchanted by the ability to reach into dark places and personal trauma to deliver a compelling performance. This type of trauma envy can mislead actors into places of emotional (and physical) self-harm. In Ledger's case, outlets salaciously tie his extreme work to his death, though there is no evidence to prove or disprove this link. This narrative produces a kind of eerie reverence in which Ledger's mental illness and subsequent suicide are viewed as a tragic but normalized byproduct of artmaking. This misplaces blame away from the technique and back onto actors. The trope of the suffering artist is alive and well and remains a staple in American culture. It has found a foothold in the glorification of psychological realism, which can be traced back to Strasbergian theories of acting and the belief that one must break down the barriers between actor and self to achieve authenticity.

Post-Dramatic Stress: Recognizing the Potential for Negative Impact

There has been relatively little exploration done regarding actors' mental health care or how certain acting theories and directorial techniques may contribute to medical issues (physically or emotionally). In the Performing Arts Medical Association's Journal, *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*, fewer than six articles were published about actors' mental

⁷⁸ Ohikuare, “How Actors Create Emotions.”

health and well-being between 1999 and 2015, highlighting a striking gap in research regarding actor emotional health and welfare.⁷⁹

Understanding mental health as something that can be treated with preventative care is relatively new. There has been (and still is) a pervasive stigma surrounding mental health and emotional fitness. The recognition of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 marked a turning point for survivors who, for the first time, became able to name and seek a diagnosis for their often-debilitating condition. While the discovery of PTSD is linked to veterans of war, it can be caused by any number of stimuli and is a result of both physical and emotional trauma.⁸⁰

Cheryl Kennedy McFarren makes the connection that actors who use techniques like affective memory are at a heightened risk of PTSD symptoms. These symptoms can be triggered by sensory recall, include “psychological flashbacks... in which the brain and body respond to a trigger as the original trauma.”⁸¹ However, when the symptoms of the PTSD response are then perceived by an acting instructor as meeting the needs of the scene, the actor may be rewarded for going through a trauma response, ultimately causing further use and damage. This can create an expectation of repeated traumatic experiences (such as in the case of McFarren, who was told to repeat the technique every time she performed the monologue). With the naming and subsequent validation of PTSD by the American Psychological Association came an uptick in the recorded number of cases of PTSD in America – this does not necessarily mean the number

⁷⁹ Maxwell, Seton, and Szabo, “The Australian Actors’ Wellbeing Study.”

⁸⁰ McFarren, “Acknowledging Trauma/Rethinking Affective Memory.”

⁸¹ McFarren.

of cases increased but might signify an increased recognition. PTSD remains extremely prevalent in the United States, and the likelihood of working with an actor who has experienced trauma is high.⁸²

Trauma researchers, such as Bessel van der Kolk, have offered much-needed clarity to the study of trauma and how it manifests in the body and mind. His book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, explains how and why trauma can be stored within the body and ways in which it may respond to new stimuli.⁸³ Through his case studies, van der Kolk uncovers that trauma is rarely experienced in a logical or linear pattern, but rather as fragments of emotions that make it exceptionally difficult for the person experiencing that trauma to control these experiences that are not easily contained within language. Additionally, many who have experienced trauma do not know their triggers and may experience a surprise panic or trauma response. In conversation with van der Kolk's work, McFarren also offers that it is possible for trauma survivors to become "dependent on, [and/or] seemingly addicted to, the psychophysiological experience (hyper-arousal/dissociation) of trauma, seeking out experiences that recreate the familiar psychophysiological state."⁸⁴ McFarren draws the connection that those who fit this description may be drawn to Affective Memory work for this reason and could be incredibly dangerous to their fellow actors. In this case, it would be possible to utilize The Method as a scapegoat of sorts due to its valorization of unrestrained emotional response and accompanying action. Most acting teachers/directors are not trained mental health experts and would therefore be ill-equipped to

⁸² McFarren.

⁸³ van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*.

⁸⁴ McFarren, "Acknowledging Trauma/Rethinking Affective Memory."

handle a significant and dangerous trauma response in one of their students/actors or may not be able to recognize repeated trauma or psychological abuse, making the use of this technique risky at best.⁸⁵

Mark Seton, an Australian researcher who investigates actor welfare, has greatly contributed to the relatively limited scholarship that is available on the subject. In his research, he further complicates McFarren's argument that PTSD can be triggered through affective memory practice with the addition that "the enactment and witnessing of trauma in the context of rehearsal and subsequent performance can *also* leave its imprint on the actor's lives, even if they had never experienced the trauma prior to performing the role."⁸⁶ This argument is troubling, as it demonstrates the risk of not just uncovering past trauma but inflicting new trauma upon actors. It further complicates the questions of ethics with regard to how to safely engage with potentially traumatic material and storylines, many of which are intimate. Seton's research maintains a focused lens on the experience of the actor. Still, the assertion that new trauma can be caused during the performance or repeated viewing of a production also opens the door for inquiries regarding the emotional welfare of stage management or other crew members who are witness to the production night after night. In one study conducted by Elly Konijn, a full professor of Media Psychology at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, it was found that the experience of acting intense emotions raises the same chemical responses in the body as a small car crash.⁸⁷ The repetition of

⁸⁵ Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus*.

⁸⁶ Seton, "'Post-Dramatic' Stress."

⁸⁷ Konijn, *Acting Emotions*.

this work without techniques to counterbalance the negative effects could prove highly problematic for actors' well-being.

Seton coins the phrase “post-dramatic” stress as a parallel to post-traumatic stress and broadens its usage to signify re-triggered trauma and the impact of new trauma due to risky technical practices in the performing arts. In the coining of this phrase, Seton recognizes that it is impossible to determine the impact of a technique or text on any given actor, as these impacts are highly individualized. Additionally, some actors may be more resilient to certain techniques or situations than others, depending on their personal history and support. These questions of safe interaction with risky material are critical to the field, as theatre often dwells in the extremes of human stories. These are not arguments for censorship of certain material, but an argument that this risk is not necessary and a call to investigate ways to safely and effectively interact with potentially harmful subjects in a way that does not cause further harm. Although deeper study is needed on this topic, early explorations and anecdotal evidence suggest that post-dramatic stress is worrisome at best and deeply troubling when paired with the theatre's hierarchical systems and the limited guidance for professional and directorial ethics.

In her work investigating this topic, *A Crucible for Actors: Questions of Directorial Ethics*, scholar Suzanne Burgoyne calls for a deeper exploration of how ethics could and should play a role in contemporary theatre-making. She calls on her own mistakes during a production of *The Crucible* in which she is unaware of the potential psychological ramifications of the work and asks her actors to explore and dive deeply into the root causes of human evil, a process she later realizes she was ill-prepared to handle. Burgoyne asked her actors to physicalize many of the darkest themes in the piece (*The Crucible* being known as one of the darkest plays in the regularly performed theatrical cannon), to find their dark and hidden emotions to better

understand the piece as a whole. In one exercise, actors were asked to destroy a cardboard box as if it were someone that they hated. This exercise was not framed in the imagined world of the play but instead asked the students to think about destroying someone in their real lives. She asked her actors to find personal analogies in which they identified with their characters (a process that remains tied to The Method). However, in doing so, she was unprepared for the lasting emotional effects, or what Seton would refer to as the effects of “post-dramatic stress,” on the cast who were no longer working in the world of the imaginary but had instead begun to surface some of their own darkest fears without proper therapeutic assistance. Psychologist and acting theorist Susana Bloch also uses the term “emotional hangover” to describe the negative effects of lingering emotions called forth inorganically. She likens an emotional hangover to a shadow of a feeling that can affect the physicality and mood of an actor long after the scene work has concluded.

Participants in this production began to report nightmares and negative impacts on their ability to cope on a day-to-day basis. Actors became fearful of certain scenes in which their emotions were difficult to control, or the energy felt unsafe to them, as there were no boundaries within which to contain the work from their real life. Burgoyne reflects that her theatre training had not prepared her for the actors' psychological fallout after leading them through these exercises. She calls on the stated goals of theatre and therapy being different in that a therapist's “dramatic exercises evoke emotional responses in order to use them to affect a personal change in the patient. The directors' dramatic exercises evoke emotional responses in the actor in order to use them to create an artistic experience for the audience.”⁸⁸ This distinction is critical and

⁸⁸ Burgoyne, “A Crucible for Actors.”

highlights a need for stronger industry ethics. If someone wishes to facilitate techniques, they will need, at minimum, a firm grounding in mental health support. Additionally, the actors would need to be fully informed of the risks before their involvement and equipped with strategies to pause or end the work as necessary.

As a continuation and broadening of these questions, Burgoyne and her colleagues, Karen Poulin and Ashley Rearden, published *The Impact of Acting on Student Actors: Boundary Blurring, Growth, and Emotional Distress*. This study interviewed fifteen actors whose professional experience level ranges from college undergraduates to long-term professional actors. They discovered that “the blurring of boundaries between actor and character may be a significant condition for impact, and that the actor’s ability to control that blurring may influence whether an acting experience leads to growth or emotional distress.”⁸⁹

When I speak about boundaries here, I am referring to the separation of character and self. There has been much debate surrounding the separation of self and character. This question is often traced back to acting theorist Dennis Diderot. His paradox asks whether a great actor is such because they do not feel, or if a great actor is such because they deeply feel their character's experiences. Diderot argues for an emotionless actor, who is able to maintain complete control, but this question has continued to spark the curiosity of acting theorists to this day.⁹⁰

Internationally renowned director, Peter Brook, argues for three connections: between the actor, their scene partners, and the audience, requiring the management of two worlds simultaneously.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Burgoyne, Poulin, and Rearden, “The Impact of Acting on Student Actors.”

⁹⁰ Diderot, *The Paradox of Acting*.

⁹¹ Brook, *The Empty Space*.

Acting theorist Michael Chekhov argues that a great actor must be able to almost step out of their own body and observe their own acting,⁹² while Vsevolod Meyerhold focuses specifically on the physicality of the actor, and breaks down gesture to its beginning, middle, and end to emphasize a cyclical practice that does not rely on the emotional catharsis of the actor.⁹³ However, as we have seen, Strasberg's teachings emphasize the cathartic exploration and the need for the actor to feel and experience the emotion as if they were the character. He rejects intellectualism and requires deep psychological investment. Despite this exploration of Diderot's paradox, practices of affective memory and psychologically-based techniques, as advocated by The Method, remain dominant practices in American Acting, resulting in regularly blurred boundaries between self and character.

Burgoyne, Poulin, and Rearden's analysis identifies these blurred boundaries as a regular and problematic consequence of many contemporary acting techniques. When boundaries are blurred, actors risk endangering themselves and their scene partner(s). This study suggests that many actors do not receive extensive formal training to create and maintain the important distinctions between themselves and their characters. This skill is left to be uncovered through lived experience. In some cases, it is also actively dismissed as a practice that is too intellectual and could limit the spontaneity and creativity of the actor. The combination of a lack of training and conflicting messages regarding the necessity of boundaries risks harm both to the actor and to their scene partner(s).⁹⁴

⁹² Chamberlain, *Michael Chekhov*.

⁹³ Pitches, *Vsevolod Meyerhold*.

⁹⁴ Burgoyne, Poulin, and Rearden, "The Impact of Acting on Student Actors."

While one actor may be struggling with their blurred boundaries and emotions, their scene partner is now also at a higher risk of emotional and physical injury. One participant in this study “[speaks] of an out-of-control acting partner”... ‘he just couldn’t sometimes tell the difference... between him as a character and him as a person.’”⁹⁵ The phrasing of “out-of-control” highlights the dangers of the situation, particularly in a scene that contains close, intimate, or violent content. Physically, the danger becomes immediately clear. And in cases where damage occurs, a bruise, cut, or in some cases, a broken bone can be spotted much faster than the emotional risks, such as a panic attack, internalized trauma, or depression. Typically, the physical injury is treated with immediate attention, as there is no need for additional proof of injury and can be treated.

In some cases, the actor may remain silent and tend to their wounds on their own in private. However, an emotional injury may take months or years to uncover or treat and can be difficult to do individually. In the particular incident that was spoken about in Burgoyne’s study, the scene was that of a violent rape. Safety procedures were inadequate to handle the situation, and the actress would often become bruised and thrown too hard. She states that “he would often cross those lines between ‘This is safe and this is not safe,’”⁹⁶ This experience is not only one of physical trauma but emotional trauma in which the actor received sustained physical abuse and feared for their well-being, which has the potential for major emotional damage. During the infamous production of *Killer Joe* at Profiles Theatre in Chicago, as I detail in the introduction, Daryll Cox regularly injures his castmates. He would ignore the fight choreography and inflict

⁹⁵ Burgoyne, Poulin, and Rearden.

⁹⁶ Burgoyne, Poulin, and Rearden.

real violence against his cast members or add sudden moves with increased physical intensity. These incidents were regularly minimized as being “in the moment.” This has become a common phrase among actors, which, over time, has produced a culture in which actors are regularly not held responsible for the actions they perform while in character.⁹⁷ Of the fifteen actors interviewed by Burgoyne and her team, almost all of them had a story of emotional trauma brought on by the blurring of boundaries by themselves or by scene partners.

Beyond the immediate impacts of acute physical or emotional trauma, research hints at a darker undertone of a culture in which actors attempt to cope with the damage caused by blurred boundaries or post-dramatic stress by self-medicating using drugs, alcohol, or other easily abused and potentially harmful activities. In a study of 782 Australian Actors, titled *the Australian Actors' Wellbeing Study*, preliminary findings suggested that a high number of actors used “a wide variety of prescribed, over-the-counter, herbal and illicit substances” along with alcohol as a means to “cope with the more acute pressures associated with demanding roles.”⁹⁸ This use of alcohol and other substances is described as a “reliance” and predominantly used as a tool to “cool down,” while also being associated with “forms of sociality linked to working in this field.”⁹⁹ In other words, going out for a drink is both a coping mechanism and a necessary part of the social lives of actors. In a field where informal networks remain a necessary part of industry success, the temptation to abuse alcohol combined with accumulated acute trauma suggests that intervention in actor training and normalized actor culture may be necessary.

⁹⁷ Levitt and Piatt, “At Profiles Theatre the Drama—and Abuse—Is Real.”

⁹⁸ Maxwell, Seton, and Szabo, “The Australian Actors’ Wellbeing Study.”

⁹⁹ Maxwell, Seton, and Szabo.

This data offers that actors naturally seek some form of closure. When they are not provided with safe and healthy alternatives, they may seek relief through socially acceptable methods and ultimately deepen the harm. In addition to high alcohol use in general, there is also a positive correlation between the intensity of a show and the consumption of alcohol and other illicit substances.¹⁰⁰ Deborah Margolin, a professor at Yale University, speaks to her experience of needing a large amount of time to fully remove herself from the characters she plays. She has found success through yoga, movement, exercise, and meditation. She notes that she learned from experience that without some form of closure, she continues to carry the performance with her in unhealthy ways.¹⁰¹ While some, such as Margolin, can learn techniques over time, without being able to name concepts such as boundary management, emotional hangover, or closure, it can be exceedingly difficult for actors to seek out the care and resources that they need. Many actors who experience distress see this as a failing of their talent as opposed to a failing of their technique or a skill set that can be learned just as vocal control and flexibility can be learned. This may result in permanent damage or leaving the industry entirely, thinking that they could not handle the profession's requirements.

Inside the *Australian Actors' Wellbeing Study*, researchers discovered that most actors practiced some sort of warm-up routine to enter the theatre space and prepare for a rehearsal or performance, but very few of these performers also practiced a cool-down routine.¹⁰² Cool-down techniques, or closure, is repeatedly identified as one of the most under-valued techniques for

¹⁰⁰ Maxwell, Seton, and Szabo.

¹⁰¹ Ohikuare, "How Actors Create Emotions."

¹⁰² Maxwell, Seton, and Szabo, "The Australian Actors' Wellbeing Study."

combating emotional hangover or post-dramatic stress. Seton furthers this argument by offering that the beginning of a solution could be “enabling actors to prepare themselves more wisely as they construct an embodied performance, and, providing support for actors in the cool-down and aftermath, with the space and interpersonal resources to incorporate the experience of their performance in a resilient manner.”¹⁰³ This “Resilient Vulnerability” forms the basis of self-care techniques that Seton is working to construct and implement as a necessary part of actor training and actor culture and reinforces the development of closure as a pillar of intimacy direction.

Dual Relationships in Acting

In addition to the distinction between self and character, further definitions are needed to define the relationships amongst actors when they are either in character or out of character. When acting as a character, there may be different rules of consent or different words that are allowed to be spoken because they are in the script; however, outside the world of the play, the boundaries of that relationship may change. Dr. Ben E. Benjamin and Cherie Sohnen-Moe, in their work, *The Ethics of Touch*, describe this as maintaining dual relationships. This process is extra complicated for somatic professionals, such as actors. Actors are often asked to engage in touch outside the bounds of how they would engage with their colleagues on a day-to-day basis, such as grabbing the neck, throwing them down onto a bed, or even simulation of sexual acts. These actions may serve the needs of the character and of the story but are only allowed during those specific scenes. Consent to perform these actions does not carry through to other scenarios. Benjamin defines dual relationships as “the overlapping of professional and social roles and

¹⁰³ Seton, “‘Post-Dramatic’ Stress.”

interactions between two people.”¹⁰⁴ Ensemble members must regularly navigate a myriad of possible dual relationships beyond that of work colleagues. These relationships may include a combination of friends, romantic partners, sexual partners, family members, business partners, mentors, and students among others. Additionally, over time and as trust builds, new relationships are bound to emerge, both within the world of the play and outside of it.

There is a common phenomenon in the theatre known colloquially as the “showmance” in which two actors (often playing romantic counterparts) begin to develop a romantic relationship in their non-work lives. An inciting factor for this is poor boundary management, as explored in *The Impact of Acting on Student Actors: Boundary Blurring, Growth, and Emotional Distress*.¹⁰⁵ These blurred boundaries create situations in which actors cannot differentiate their manufactured emotions from their honest feelings about that person. The dual relationship of a colleague in real life and lover within the world of the play become indistinguishable. This can have severe and problematic consequences for the personal lives of those involved.

Benjamin and Sohnen-Moe argue that it is unethical for a therapist or somatic practitioner to engage in a romantic relationship with one of their clients. In the same way, I argue that it would be unethical for an intimacy director to engage in a romantic relationship with any member of the ensemble during the run of a show on which they are working. As the field of intimacy direction continues to be shaped, this must become an ethical standard within the profession. I encourage expanding this ethical standard to encompass directors, artistic directors, and other high-level theatre practitioners. Benjamin argues that “the power differential that exists

¹⁰⁴ Sohnen-Moe and Benjamin, *The Ethics of Touch*.

¹⁰⁵ Burgoyne, Poulin, and Rearden, “The Impact of Acting on Student Actors.”

in a helping relationship demands that the practitioner behave ethically by clearly defining and maintaining relationship boundaries.”¹⁰⁶ This could simply mean waiting to start a romantic relationship until the current contract has ended, assuming there is no contract ahead that would put similar power restraints on those wishing to engage romantically.¹⁰⁷

With an industry built on short term contracts and rapidly shifting relationships, in which one person may be a director one year and an actor the next, there is no one size fits all rule. This instead calls for an evaluation of the potential risk in the dual relationship. A dual relationship that involves a family member who is playing a nefarious villain may not be as risky as two young and immature friends who play the part of lovers. Benjamin invites readers to explore some important questions that can help assess the risk of the dual relationship, such as the intimacy level of those involved and its relevance to the practice at hand. The participants' relative maturity will also have an impact, as well as whether or not these people have engaged in this kind of dual relationship in the past. The maturity and preparation of those involved play an important role when deciding whether or not the dual relationship is worth the risk.

It is also worth investigating the consequences of not taking a job due to the risky dual relationship at hand. Benjamin reminds us that, for many, the need to participate in dual relationships may be impacted by monetary compensation. In this cultural moment, when the COVID-19 pandemic has wiped out the vast majority of live performance jobs, the pressures to take work, regardless of relationship risks, are exponentially higher. This is compounded when

¹⁰⁶ Sohnen-Moe and Benjamin, *The Ethics of Touch*.

¹⁰⁷ I have included an example of the relationship policy that I drafted for Intimacy Directors and Coordinators in 2020. See Appendix C.

considering that it is much more likely for a white artist to be hired than their Black and Brown counterparts.¹⁰⁸ It is imperative that boundary management and emotional welfare practices, such as the ones I will describe later in this chapter, become more normalized so that performers do not need to decide between financial security, their emotional well-being, and the fate of their personal relationships.¹⁰⁹

Regarding scenes of intimacy, violence, or intimate violence, the risks associated with blurred boundaries within dual relationships can become exponentially higher. Actors put their bodies into passionate and potentially triggering positions night after night. In these situations, actors may also be subject to physical and visual stimuli as well, such as a leg being pressed into their groin or the imagery of another actor's nude body. An actor may also enter into a state of arousal or respond with a vascular reaction, regardless of their attraction or personal feelings toward another player. While on stage, particularly in romantic scenarios, the body may have difficulty understanding whether they are aroused by the actor or the situation, blurring the actor boundaries. This is a situation in which regular boundary maintenance could prevent the misattribution of these emotions. It is a common practice, when casting a show, to have a "chemistry read," in which two candidates are asked to read to discover whether they have chemistry or not. The current discourse surrounding actor chemistry adds to the risk involved in blurred boundaries, as the chemistry that is being read for is often found between the two actors, not the two characters. Actors have been asked to go on dates or get to know one another better

¹⁰⁸ Actors Equity Association, "Actors' Equity Releases First-Ever Diversity Study Showing Disparities in Hiring in the Theatre Industry."

¹⁰⁹ Sohnen-Moe and Benjamin, *The Ethics of Touch*.

to improve “chemistry.” This practice exists under the idea that chemistry is an uncontrolled substance that some partners have, and others do not,¹¹⁰ and can contribute to blurred boundaries and may lead to the development of a “showmance.”

As seen in the Profiles Theatre exposé, Daryl Cox regularly used these blurred boundaries to his advantage, sleeping with his stage partners who were almost always younger and new to the industry.¹¹¹ Other examples of this include Tony Award nominee Marin Ireland, whose personal relationship with abusive actor Scott Sheppard regularly crossed over into their stage lives. She felt as though her hands were tied, needing to perform intimate scenes with her real-life abuser, all the while knowing that he would not be fired due to his standing with the production company.¹¹² In both cases, the power imbalance in combination with blurred boundaries leads to manipulation and further abuse.

Practices for closure need continued investigation to create highly effective and adaptable techniques for situations of varying intensity. At the minimum, closure practices should be encouraged and facilitated when working with scenes of hyper-exposed intimacy. The implementation of closure should also be explored as a regular healthy practice for actors broadly. Closure practices remain a highly personalized experience for the actor. Still, recent

¹¹⁰ Later in this chapter, I will articulate how this is a false belief that has stemmed due to the lack of techniques that have existed with which to choreograph and coach intimacy. Chemistry can be manufactured using technical skills, much like all other character traits in theatre.

¹¹¹ Levitt and Piatt, “At Profiles Theatre the Drama—and Abuse—Is Real.”

¹¹² Healy, “Sex and Violence, Beyond the Script.”

scholarship offers common themes that create effective closure techniques, and there is a demand for further development of effective closure practices.

Practicing Closure: Stepping Out and Unblurring Boundaries

Boundary maintenance remains one of the key resources for maintaining actor emotional welfare and dual relationships in the wake of post-dramatic stress. Susana Bloch offers a non-psychological approach to acting and closure that has informed the initial development of many intimacy directors' closure techniques. Bloch's system, which she began researching in the 1970s, explores a version of outside-in acting, which has not yet become a popularized acting technique in major actor training institutions, but instead, skirts around the edges of scholarship that investigates actor well-being. Her system, *Alba Emoting*, argues that the most efficient and effective way to produce emotion on stage is through the execution of precise physical actions and not by utilizing real or imagined "emotion generating situations."¹¹³ She invites scholars to be critical about overindulging affective memory techniques and warns of the emotional dangers to actors who are being "possessed by the role."¹¹⁴

Bloch has a background in scientific research and quantitative analysis, and she approaches acting from this lens. She argues that emotions are accessible without the need to visualize events from someone's personal life or even to create them from an imagined life. Bloch abandoned the practice of acting early in her life due to her own negative experiences with emotional recall and the lack of care work, in addition to her perception that actors were diving

¹¹³ Bloch and Sandor, *Alba Emoting*.

¹¹⁴ Bloch and Sandor.

too deeply into roles and reacting in ways that put themselves and their scene partners at risk. This experience echo's that of the respondents in Burgoyne, Poulin, and Rearden's study as well as the reports in the *Australian Actors' Wellbeing Study*. Bloch's methodology was created to find her way back to an acting practice that felt safe and could be implemented efficiently by practitioners.¹¹⁵

Bloch takes the stance that there are six basic emotions: anger, joy, fear, sadness, tenderness, and eroticism. These six categories can be mixed and matched to create more nuanced emotions. The procedure for generating emotion is a very technical and systematic procedure in which "the required respiratory pattern [is] taught, followed by the precise instructions to contract and relax specific parts of the body and finally to add the corresponding facial expression."¹¹⁶ For instance, to produce the emotion of anger, an actor would be asked to replicate a series of intense breaths at the correct rhythm, contract their arms, chest, and jaw, clench their teeth, and finally adjust their face into a tight-lipped scowl. Once having done this, actors were able to recite lines or perform scenes while generating the correct emotion for the audience.¹¹⁷

During her research, she noticed that some participants found it difficult to return to a neutral emotional and physical state once the emotion was called forth. This was a pattern that she had seen in other actors as well. She cites that a "great number of actors enter into roles representing very intense emotional states which they often cannot abandon once their

¹¹⁵ Bloch and Sandor.

¹¹⁶ Bloch and Sandor.

¹¹⁷ Bloch and Sandor.

performance is finished.”¹¹⁸ This is an example of an emotional hangover. Actors can remain stuck or trapped in the induced emotion and carry around the physical ramifications of these emotions beyond the confines of the production. An emotional hangover may occur independently from Seton’s Post-Dramatic Stress; however, it is also often a symptom of Post-Dramatic Stress. Symptoms of an emotional hangover include exhaustion, fatigue, depression, and increased stress levels, among others. These effects may be short or long-term and vary depending on the person.

In direct response to her recognition of emotional hangover, Bloch developed what she calls the “Step-Out” procedure to help participants to return to a neutral emotional and physical state. It involves “three cycles of deep breathing, total facial relaxation, and a change in physical posture.”¹¹⁹ This signals a full reset of the body and attempts to allow actors to remove themselves from the emotion generated artificially and not organically. Theatre practitioners have been deriving techniques for closure, many of which resemble Bloch’s Step-Out procedure. This multi-modal technique has inspired similar practices that are widely adopted in the field of intimacy direction. In my work, these techniques have been received with great enthusiasm and have been hailed as one of the single greatest takeaways during my intimacy workshops. In the next section, I will offer how I utilize and teach closure techniques for safe scenes of intimacy.

¹¹⁸ Bloch and Sandor.

¹¹⁹ Bloch and Sandor.

Tonia Sina's Instant Chemistry Exercise

When teaching an intimacy workshop, closure is the first pillar that I bring into space, much like it is the first pillar I have chosen to address in this dissertation. In combination with a saturation of affective memory techniques, the narrative of the suffering artist has created a culture in which the healthy management of emotions is rarely encouraged as a method of study. Those who experienced trauma or experienced harm were seen as lacking in what it takes to be professional actors. This erases the understanding of resilient vulnerability as a learned skill that can be practiced. Closure is the radical act of separating from the work and actively choosing when to engage with it and when to not. It is one of the most powerful tools that I have found to promote actor health and welfare and the building of healthy relationships.

During the early phases of her development of professional intimacy direction, my colleague and mentor, Tonia Sina, created an exercise, Instant Chemistry, which remains a core exercise for her method "Intimacy for the Stage." This exercise involves extended eye contact and uses the imagination to create feelings of intense adoration for a scene partner. It was originally designed to respond to the "chemistry read,"¹²⁰ and Sina has used this exercise to articulate that chemistry can be created between any two partners and is not something that some people either have or do not have. It is a stage technique, much like all other emotions we utilize for storytelling. The exercise aims to provide a safe container within which artists can explore manufactured chemistry.

¹²⁰ Chemistry reads are a normalized industry practice in which actors are paired together during an audition process to test organic chemistry. This practice assumes that chemistry cannot be manufactured, and that actors either have it or don't.

With encouragement from Sina, I have continued to investigate Instant Chemistry and regularly teach it as a part of my intimacy workshops. I have done so with explicit permission from Sina, and through this exploration, my use of this exercise has diverged slightly from Sina's original purpose. Although it was first developed as an acting exercise, I caution that it should not be used for character development. I do *not* consider this to be a helpful exercise for character development because it does not rely on the audience's perspective and could misattribute feeling strong emotions to acting well. I have heard stories of directors asking two actors to perform Instant Chemistry during a rehearsal to develop chemistry between the two characters. This can be a risky endeavor without the proper guidance and emphasis on boundary management. I argue that the further development of a common set of directorial ethics can increase accountability and promote adequate training before engaging in high-risk emotional practices.

Additionally, the use of Instant Chemistry as a character development exercise can inadvertently perpetuate the narrative that one must *feel* something to act it and could reinforce the problematic narratives that link back to Strasbergian theories of acting. I utilize Instant Chemistry as a tool that can help the performer develop resilient vulnerability, understand closure, and practice reattributing their bodies' real physical responses to the imagined stimuli.¹²¹

¹²¹ In the same way that athletes must use a variety of exercise to fully strengthen their body, it is important to note that Instant Chemistry is not the end all be all of emotional fitness exercises and works best when it is part of a rich and holistic actor practice. I will use Instant Chemistry to illustrate a number of key elements of closure, but do not claim that it is the best or only exercise that can be used. Closure is highly personalized, and those who do not find that Instant

These skills will benefit the practice of acting later and provide an actor with support for managing their emotions in the moment, should that be needed.

I liken Instant Chemistry to a pull up for two reasons. The first is that a pull up will help strengthen the body to perform strenuous tasks. In this way, Instant Chemistry may strengthen the actor's emotional resilience for more strenuous scenes. Secondly, the safe practice of a pull-up, or any physical exercise, requires the proper form to enter and exit the exercise. If a gymnast suddenly drops from the peak of a pull-up, they are at significant risk of injury. Instead, they are trained to lower out of the pull up with control until they can safely dismount from the pull-up bar. The same principle applies to emotional work. Actors can exercise their ability to go deeply into the world of imaginary circumstances to maintain their presence without losing the technical aspects of the work (such as lines, blocking, or breath support) and safely exit that world and return to the present moment.

The physical metaphor does not stop there. Much like physical fitness, emotional fitness fluctuates depending on the given circumstances. Actors who have depleted their emotional energy during the day find that they are unable to participate in Instant Chemistry exercises in the same way that they could when they were emotionally fresh. The depth of exploration in instant chemistry is far less important than the form the actors use to safely enter and exit the work. For this reason, it is important that the facilitator set up the space in a way that supports modification.

Chemistry, as described here, to be an accessible exercise for them should either seek modifications or additional exercises that help them accomplish similar goals.

When setting up this exercise, all participants should understand the learning objectives as well as the boundaries of the exercise. This transparency builds trust between the facilitator and the actors, who will then be more present in the exercise. Without this, the actor may spend the majority of the exercise fearful about what could come next. This exercise asks actors to enter into a vulnerable space. Thus, they must understand what keeps them safe and what they may be asked to do while in that vulnerable state. I also provide modifications, alternatives, and exit strategies that allow participants the opportunity to challenge themselves without putting themselves in harm's way. This creates a space for active consent, as all parties know to what they are consenting, why they are being asked to engage in the activity and have tools to utilize if they change their mind for any reason.

I have chosen to center my analysis around my own teaching of Tonia Sina's exercise, Instant Chemistry. For the absence of doubt, Tonia Sina first developed and named the exercise, and, through my work and practice, I have developed my own rhythm and learning objectives. Sina's development of this exercise remains a central pillar of intimacy methodology for numerous practitioners. Many of my colleagues teach versions of Instant Chemistry, as it is an extremely versatile exercise that lends itself to a wide variety of learning objectives, and Sina's mentorship has been a part of this development.

While it can be an extremely productive exercise, I caution that Instant Chemistry should not be done without a foundation of mental health training and structural support, including intentional room set-up, operation, and closure. Additionally, actors should not try this exercise alone without guidance. Regardless of which version of Instant Chemistry is being utilized, it requires extensive closure, and participants must feel free to choose their level of participation at

any point. I invite participants to challenge themselves and reward the use of modifications and exit strategies that allow for sustainable learning.

For my purposes, Instant Chemistry consists of four rounds of eye contact, with the fourth round holding opportunities for additional (but limited) physical and imaginative prompts. The first round of this exercise asks two partners to make eye contact and be present with one another. Participants stand roughly arms distance away from their partner, close enough for intimate eye contact, but far enough away that they are not at risk of being in physical contact with each other. Often, when working with less experienced actors, I find that this first round is extremely difficult. There are generally at least three waves of laughter that ripple through the group in less than 60 seconds that I ask them to stand and be present with their partners. Additionally, once one person begins to laugh, it tends to waterfall throughout the space until it becomes almost impossible for anyone to stay present or maintain eye contact. Through this, I breathe audibly and make adjustments to re-ground the room. In most cases, with enough time and patience, the laughter will quiet.

At the end of this round, I lead a discussion investigating the laughter that was present in the room and what purpose it was serving. In general, laughter can break emotional tension and is a common tool for communication used for reassuring comfort. This is perhaps best illustrated by the book *The Humor Code*, in which Dr. Peter McGraw offers his theory of Benign Violations to explain why humans laugh. In this theory, any reason for laughter can be broken up into two components: the violation of an expectation and something that makes that violation acceptable. Take the classic humorous situation of a person slipping on a banana peel. The violation is that the person has fallen to the ground. In general, we do not expect that someone will just fall, and more often than not, it is usually a bad thing when someone falls. However, in this scenario, the

person who falls may be either animated, the fall itself may be exaggerated, or the person may get up immediately after, indicating that they are not injured. Because the person has not sustained harm, the audience can then laugh at the absurdity of a person slipping on a banana peel. The violation has become benign. Without recovery, this would not be a benign situation. Conversely, without the fall, there would be no violation and thus no laughter.

When exploring prolonged eye contact, the “violation” is the long duration of eye contact. Prolonged eye contact is relatively uncommon in society and often only shared between extremely intimate partners. The eyes are an area of vulnerability, often referred to as the “window to the soul.” Short bursts of eye contact may even be extremely difficult for many, let alone being asked to hold and maintain that eye contact. Some scientists also believe that prolonged eye contact can be either a sign of aggression, as well as a sign of intimacy. Laughter is then employed as a tool to diminish the intensity, reassure non-aggression, and remove vulnerability in the moment. The laughter makes this violation of prolonged eye contact benign. It often has an undertone of poking fun at the silliness of the exercise itself and positions the participant superior to or outside of the exercise itself. In essence, it removes the participant from the exercise and limits their ability to learn from it. The laughter serves as a shield from vulnerability and protects the participants from perceived negative outcomes. The students have named these negative outcomes as a fear of rejection, a fear that their partner will think negative things about them, or a fear that the boundaries may become blurred and that the signals would be misconstrued as romantic offerings. They fear for the changed relationship once the exercise is over and do not trust the exercise's boundaries to protect them.

It is far easier to look at other parts of the face, such as the cheekbones or nose. The moment we make eye contact with someone, the stakes are exponentially higher. When making

eye contact, it is impossible to hide. There is no way to fool the brain into thinking that they are invisible or unseen. Participants often report in feedback the sudden obsession with their features, fear that they did not brush their teeth, that they blink too much, or that this person thinks that they are weird for staring at them in this way. I identify this as the *seeing of being seen*. It is the undeniable knowledge that someone is seeing you in the space, in that very moment; this creates an opportunity not only for rejection but also acceptance. There is a loss of control and intense vulnerability, and therefore the body employs several mechanisms to protect itself. For some – this can be laughter. For others, they may come to focus on the space just in front of their partner’s eyes. Some will zone out a little and remove themselves from the moment, all of which allow the person to disengage from the eye contact at hand. While I ask actors to be present with one another as each other, not as characters, I do not push this round very long, and in the aftermath, I reinforce the idea of presence and building trust with one another as professional colleagues. This is not time to investigate or validate feelings that may have come up for that person or learn some truth about their character. This round is rooted in building trust, finding calm inside the discomfort, and continuing to unpack the difference between uncomfortable and unsafe.¹²²

When working with this exercise, participants must have and practice using an exit strategy. An exit strategy supports actor agency to invest in the process, knowing that they have a safety net. For exercises such as this, I offer two types of exit strategies; I call them the “big exit” and the “mini exit.” The big exit strategy allows students to remove themselves completely from the exercise. A mini exit strategy is a tool that can be used to less noticeably step out and tend to

¹²² I offer a tool for exploring the difference between uncomfortable and unsafe in chapter six.

their needs. Both exit strategies create space for distance and an invitation to re-join the exercise when they feel prepared. Defense strategies above, such as laughter and zoning out, are often done reflexively and are not intentional choices on the part of the learner. They can often remain unnoticed, and participants can leave the workshop thinking that they engaged fully with the exercise when, in fact, they missed 99% of the work. When students feel pressure to “perform” learning, they use exit strategies that are unnoticeable to both themselves and sometimes to their teachers. I have found that it is far more effective for participants to have an exit strategy that allows them to go in and out of the exercise intentionally and at their own pace. This allows them to remain attentive to their own learning needs and may inform them as to what assistance from their facilitator will allow them to do their best work. Exit strategies help maintain the boundaries between when the actor is working and attending to their recovery needs.

Laughter can be useful, and the body's impulses may guide an actor's performance; however, it becomes important that the actor recognize why their body has the impulse. In this exercise, I offer a metaphor of two different brains: brain one and brain two. Brain one is the ability to be present in the space. It is reacting to the stimuli of the present moment and engaging fully. Brain one is not concerned with the past or the future. The visualization of brain one is at about eye level. Brain two disconnects with the present moment and is deeply concerned with the future. Brain two is fixated on the perceived consequences of the actions that are taking place. The visualization of this brain is about a foot higher and looks down onto brain one. From this bird's eye view, brain two cannot be present in the moment but looks ahead to the future. This visualization offers language that can help participants interrogate where their impulses were located. In the first round, the impulse for laughter is often located in brain two, as it is meant to protect against future consequences. The desire to zone out is also often housed inside brain two.

When participants notice an impulse, I encourage them to interrogate it. What purpose is that impulse serving? Does it help or hinder the current goals?

The exercise moves forward, asking the participants to step into the role of two characters who adore each other, and each side trades off projecting this adoration while the other partner sends back some kind of rejection. In the final round, both parties are asked to, while maintaining eye contact, project the intention of adoration onto their partner, and their character can receive that adoration in return. In this round, there is sometimes another wave of laughter – this time; however, it more often stems from the space of brain one, in which the characters are responding to one another and being present to the moment. This laughter is useful for staying present in the moment and is authentic to the characters' work.

After moving past the neutral eye contact round, some participants find that adding character allows them to let go of the perceived consequences and stay in the brain one space. As they are no longer “themselves” and are playing a character instead, many report that they are able to more easily access intense emotions and find a presence that was more difficult for them in the previous round. For others, perceived consequences can be amplified. Particularly for students who are young both in age and in industry experience, adding the layer of adoration can make eye contact even more difficult to maintain, as they are new to the practice of boundary management. Brain two becomes preoccupied with the perceived consequence that their partner will think that they have romantic feelings for them and that the exercise's boundaries will become blurred. This exercise is a practice in closure, and participants should only push themselves as far as they can go safely. It is up to the facilitator to clarify and offer appropriate modifications and adjust their practice to the ensemble's needs.

As Susanna Bloch found in her work on Alba Emoting, even when the emotion has been manufactured, it can have a long-lasting impact. As a facilitator, I remind participants that the emotions they experience while working are real but that they do not always need to be internalized or justified beyond the workshop's given circumstances. When applied to performance, I identify that actors do not need to take responsibility for the emotions that occur during work that explores imaginary circumstances; however, they *do* need to take responsibility for *their actions*. Without this understanding, actors may internalize the manufactured emotions and superimpose incorrect justifications, such as the case of a “showmance.” This complicates the ability to healthily maintain the dual relationships necessary for the actor's work.

Susanna Bloch’s “Step-Out” process identifies the need to adjust physical posture, facial expression, and breathing pattern to fully release the manufactured emotion. As a facilitator of this exercise, I create space for actors to practice cleanly, opening new experiences, and thoroughly closing them between each of the rounds of eye contact. Each scenario within Instant Chemistry offers participants an opportunity to practice fully letting go of any inorganic emotion that arises.¹²³ In early instances of teaching this exercise, students were eager to report how they

¹²³ I make the distinction between organic and inorganic emotion. Inorganic emotion comes from the manufactured prompts within the exercise. Sometimes the prompts used in this exercise can trigger an organic response, where the participant is no longer utilizing their imagination but is instead making connections to their personal life or past trauma. They experience the prompts as themselves, not as their characters. This should be discouraged, and in this case, an exit strategy should be employed so that the participant may assess their needs, seek support as needed, and rejoin when they feel it is safe for them to do so. The participant may not realize that they have a

felt and to speak about the elaborate stories that their brains concocted. At the same time, they were silent, captivated by the eye contact. At first, I was all too eager to hear about each participant's internal experience, and I often spent too much time exploring the multitude of stories that unfolded. However, over time, I realized that this type of feedback was not serving the goals of the exercise as I set them out.¹²⁴ I now ask that students let go of the story's narrative and turn their attention to how their body is responding physically. Did their face flush? Did their heartbeat quicken? Are their shoulders tight?

By bringing the attention back to the body, I invite participants to acknowledge the physical ramifications of imaginary work and allow them time to move their body, pat down places holding tension, stretch and otherwise release the emotions that are no longer serving them beyond the imaginary circumstances. This is analogous to the “step-out” process, which aims to neutralize the body and return the breath to normal. I ask them to change their breathing pattern by taking deep breaths and use that breath to actively and intentionally change their postures. Additionally, I utilize an opening and closing ritual involving intentional breath and gratitude that is practiced between the participants. This process, known as tagging in/tagging

trigger until they are already experiencing symptoms. For this reason, a foundation in mental health support and assistants trained in Mental Health First Aid is critical for the ethical use of this exercise.

¹²⁴ Some colleagues use this type of feedback, particularly when working with early-career actors, to help them learn how to manufacture chemistry. The verbal processing of an imagined story allows them to interrogate how their imagination is serving them as an actor and how it can be used to support their craft.

out, will be explored in greater detail in the next section. Finally, I will also walk in between each of the pairs to physically create a barrier between them; this practice is part of the original Instant Chemistry exercise created by Tonia Sina. Having multiple forms of closure and physically breaking the link helps to reinforce boundaries and maintain the dual relationships of workshop participant and character.

When done safely and responsibly, Instant Chemistry invites participants to practice immersing themselves in powerful emotions, such as adoration, acceptance, rejection, and love. It creates space for participants to practice engaging more fully in the emotions of the moment. The absence of physical contact allows the participants to isolate the emotion, allowing them to let go of protecting themselves or their partner physically. Attempting to do this deep emotional exploration while also improvising physical contact would likely result in crossing physical boundaries and blurring emotional ones; however, with clear exit strategies and boundaries surrounding contact, it provides an opportunity for participants to explore and practice constructively feeling the emotion. This exercise also reminds participants that they can both safely enter the work and safely exit the work.

Tagging In/Out: The Application of Closure to Scenes of Intimacy:

There are many ways to explore closure, such as Bloch's Step-Out procedure. I teach a method known as tagging in/out that I learned through my study with Alicia Rodis and Tonia Sina at Intimacy Directors International. The general blueprint of the tag in/out process is as follows:

- 1) Participants touch palm to palm. Their hands remain about face level, and they make sustained eye contact.

- 2) Participants take a simultaneous deep breath in and out while maintaining eye contact
- 3) Participants share a double high five, signifying the end of the tag in/out

When explaining this process, I invite participants to use this moment to bring forward calm, presence, and gratitude. The shared eye contact is an undeniable reminder of the humanity of the person with which one is working. One cannot create art in a vacuum. Art must be shared, and the permeation of gratitude during intimacy work helps to protect all those involved and strengthen trust. This is an opportunity to remind oneself that the work of intimacy demands that participants protect each other and serve each other and the story to the best of their ability. Gratitude is key to building the trust that is required to work within stories of intimacy. There are many ways to bring gratitude into the work, and gratitude does not need to involve eye contact. Variations include standing back to back and sharing a breath or staring at the same object together while sending their kinesthetic awareness to their partner. No matter the shape it takes, gratitude is key to reminding the ensemble that the work done is of service to each other and that the humanity and agency of the person we are working with is more important than anything else.

Having a shared vocabulary, such as the tag in/tag out process, acts as an anchor and can release pressure from the actors to create the perfect opening and closing practice. However, as closure is a highly personalized activity, I invite actors to create a personal tag in/out process both with their scene partner and with themselves. An effective closure practice should contain the following four components:

- 1) **Multi-sensory stimulation.** Engaging more than one sense invites mindfulness of the present moment. Subtle sensations that require attention can support emotional grounding. Examples may include physical contact of another's hand, one's hand on the

chest, the swishing of water in the mouth, an audible sigh, the rubbing of hands together to create heat, among others.

- 2) **Presence and gratitude.** Central to the work of intimacy is gratitude and care both to your colleagues and to yourself. To tell extreme stories requires extreme trust. This is built over time and through practice. Centering the closure process in gratitude helps to build professional trust and reinforce the working relationship.
- 3) **Breath.** Intentional breath actively changes the rhythm of the body and can increase introspective awareness. It involves physical and sometimes auditory stimulation and can offer additional grounding benefits that help separate the real and imaginary.
- 4) **A distinctive ending.** This element signifies the end of the closure practice. It is a cue to let go of that which is unhelpful and reinforce that which is helpful. Sometimes, after performing this ending, practitioners may realize that they are still holding onto something that is not serving them. This may indicate that more than one closure method is needed or that the closure practice should be repeated. This button can serve as a checkpoint with which to assess the effectiveness of the closure practice.

Closure is not just important for the actors, but for the entire production team, especially those who must watch the show night after night. In particular, stage managers are often at a higher risk of an emotional hangover if the show requires material that has a high emotional impact. Anyone can experience an emotional hangover, whether or not they were the ones acting inside the scene.¹²⁵ All ensemble members are encouraged to build a practice that allows them to

¹²⁵ For this reason, I argue that productions should also consider how they are offering closure to their audiences, especially in immersive theatre. The checklist that I have provided may act as a

engage/disengage in ways that serve them. It is worth noting that as a general rule of thumb, I discourage hugs as a part of the closure practice. Additionally, I will ask that actors or workshop participants *do not* hug until after they have fully tagged out of the work; this can help signify if the hug is as characters or as colleagues. If the work asks them to be particularly physical or romantic, then hugging before closure may reinforce the emotions that came up during the scene work. It is important to separate a hug between friends and colleagues from a hug between characters.

Closure supports the maintenance of boundaries between character and self as well as the boundaries between the dual relationships. It should be both an individual practice as well as a shared practice between scene partners. As an intimacy director, I work with the actors to help them develop an effect tag in/out practice, as well as offer closure to the full group (including director, stage manager, assistant stage manager, and others who are in the room). I offer tools so that all involved are able to develop their closure practice before they leave the space or while in transit to their next space. Closure is more effective when practiced over time and regularly engaged as a tool for taking the body and mind back to a neutral place.

Part of the intimacy director's role is to offer healthy and effective methods for closure and invite their actors to participate in closure as a part of safe working. In the way that a fight

starting point for developing audience closure practices. I recently heard of a production who used their dramaturgical exhibit to encourage audiences to enter and exit the world of the play. This can be a creatively fulfilling exercise, and also act as a reminder that the stories they will/have witnessed are not real. There is need for more discussion to create a stronger code of ethics for how productions care for their audiences as well as their actors and crew members.

director may offer strength and flexibility warm-ups and cool-downs to their performers who are about to engage in a physically strenuous sequence, an intimacy director might offer closure techniques designed to promote actor safety and welfare.

Closure is, in some ways, a misleading term, as the pillar of closure includes opening the work as well. Perhaps it will change to the pillar of containment in the future. However, due to the dominance of warm-up practices, it is the closing of the work that has been left out of the conversation for some time and is therefore worth highlighting. Closure is not about going in and out of character – but instead, it is about signifying when the rules of how we operate with one another change. The problematic saturation of unhealthy mental practices within the acting industry has shaped a culture in which trauma can be glorified and reintroduced. Closure opens the conversation for mindful boundary maintenance and healthy mental hygiene practices that could prevent post-dramatic stress and ease instances of an emotional hangover. Effective closure practice is critical to creating trust within an ensemble and offers the chance for deeper exploration while maintaining actor health and safety as a necessary part of this work. Whatever opens can be closed.

CHAPTER 3: CONSENT

Much of the entertainment industry is engaged in a deep, un-learning about how consent functions in a rehearsal hall, production set, or entertainment space. The creative industries, in particular, have long been victim to intense power dynamics that make active and informed consent almost impossible to obtain. Since the #metoo movement went viral in 2017, consent has become a hot button topic in the media and in the entertainment industries at large. In today's entertainment world, the ramifications of an industry culture that dismissed consent as a necessary part of collaboration are being highlighted over and over again. Major news stories, many of which target A-list celebrities (such as Aziz Ansari's romantic scandal¹²⁶ in which he perceived a consensual situation and his date experienced coercive sexual pressure), have opened up a conversation about what it takes to navigate consent, particularly in the world of entertainment.

Intimacy direction is a revolutionary practice in theatre-making because it explicitly requires active and informed consent to achieve success. The quality of the practice is defined by how well consent is practiced. Many of the practices within intimacy direction are built to create avenues towards more informed consent. Most other theatre professions are judged by the quality of the product produced; however, intimacy direction has shifted this narrative, instead prioritizing the person rather than the product. This dramatic shift in priorities has created a ripple effect across the entire entertainment industry as artists grapple with how their area

¹²⁶ Garber, "Aziz Ansari and the Paradox of 'No.'"

intersects with the ideas of consent and personal agency. This begs the question: what are the barriers to consent within the entertainment industry?

Intimacy direction identifies these obstacles and creates the systems, policies, protocols, and support necessary to make space for active and informed consent to occur. Intimacy direction acts as a model for consent-based work and invites other disciplines to participate in the consent-making process. A common misconception is that the presence of an intimacy director creates consent. This is not true, as we will discuss in this chapter. Consent is a nuanced and collaborative process. The intimacy director facilitates consent and support actors through problematic and coercive power structures, but the intimacy director cannot create consent alone.

Additionally, their focus is on scenes of intimacy. Consent must be integrated into the very fabric of theatre-making, and intimacy direction asks that the industry take responsibility for their role in consent in non-intimate scenes as well as intimate ones. The intimacy director cannot and should not be present for non-intimate scenes as a type of “consent captain,” but rather, other departments may learn from the practices being used and developed within the field of intimacy direction and incorporate them into their practices.

This shift will take time, as there are deeply ingrained traditions and practices in our theatre spaces. In this chapter, I define consent using work that was originally targeted towards those engaging in sexual activities with one another and examine how these definitions and concepts are applied to theatre-making. I argue that consent is a core concept in all that we do as entertainers, not just for scenes of intimacy, and call for reflection as we interrogate our responsibility in each other’s health, well-being, and safety through the utilizing of active and informed consent.

Defining Consent

My colleagues and I differentiate between the two terms “permission” and “consent.”

Any authority in the space can give permission. The script gives permission for a kiss; the director may give permission for two actors to hold hands. Permission is the understanding that the action is allowed to take place in this space. A teacher may give students permission to yell indoors, stating that that type of action (which otherwise was perceived to be inappropriate) is allowable in this space. By saying “action,” the director gives permission for the scene to begin. Permission is a much broader concept and does not require participation in the action. Consent can only be given by those involved in the action. A director may give permission for two actors to hold hands, but the consent agreement only takes place between the two actors engaging in the action. Consent is dynamic and collaborative. It is required for the person receiving the action and the person performing the action as well.

I have often observed that when a director gives a direction, and one actor takes that direction, they often do so without checking in with their scene partner. This interaction has permission, but it lacks active consent. Adding a check-in moment between the two actors after the permission has been given creates an opportunity to establish consent. All practitioners have a responsibility to remind their collaborators to find consent even after permission has been granted. This extra step, which only takes a few seconds in many cases, can do immense work towards building trust and ensemble.

Common discourse about consent revolves mainly around sexual contact and/or performing sexual acts with a partner. Consent educators mainly focus on preventing sexual assault, sexual harassment, and rape in mainstream dating culture. In the theatre, there are no sex acts that are being performed. This is protected by actors’ unions and delineates between theatre

and other forms of adult entertainment. However, consent is not a concept that should be relegated only to sexual situations; rather, it is necessary for any kind of collaborative process. Consent can be physical or psychological and is incredibly nuanced in its applications.

Planned Parenthood defines consent as an agreement between all parties that everyone involved in the action *wants* to be involved in that action.¹²⁷ In performance, the actors' actions are in service to a story and an artistic vision, and they often depict the actions of two characters who are generally not the actors themselves. This adds a new layer to the conversation of consent – the consent between the characters and the consent between the actors. During the creative process, consent must always be maintained between the two actors, regardless of whether or not the characters are consenting. Stories of non-consent require additional care and precautions to ensure that consent remains between the actors.

Planned Parenthood further defines consent using the acronym FRIES: Freely given, Reversible, Informed, Enthusiastic, and Specific.¹²⁸ This acronym acts as a checklist for practitioners to identify whether or not consent is present and active. While it is originally crafted for those looking to engage in non-simulated sex acts, it can be readily applied to scenes of intimacy and entertainment broadly.

Consent is often thought of as a simple yes or no question. If one party has asked and the other person has said yes, then that is consent. This limited yes or no question may appear to engage consent, but it is loaded with many types of pitfalls, namely power imbalances and nuance. This is present in the Aziz Ansari example that was mentioned above. The media and

¹²⁷ Planned Parenthood, “All About Consent.”

¹²⁸ Planned Parenthood.

social media landscape repeatedly asked why the victim didn't simply say no and leave. Why did they stay? Isn't staying a sign of consent? "FRIES" provides a framework to dig deeper into the nuances and power dynamics of consent that so thickly cover the entertainment industries.

Applying "FRIES" to Scenes of Intimacy

Scenes of intimacy, nudity, or other hyper exposed physicality utilize consent for the safety of the actors, their scene partners, as well as the cast and crew. While consent should be incorporated into the very fabric of theatre-making (and daily life, for that matter), the intimacy director provides a vital role in the consent process for scenes of intimacy due to the sensitive nature of the material and the potential for the content to trigger trauma – both emotionally and physically. Using the acronym FRIES allows an intimacy director to quickly and easily create a shared framework for consent that is understood by those within the room. By establishing FRIES as a definition of consent, I also ensure that there is a framework for consent in place when I am not physically present for the rehearsal or performance of a scene. It creates a common language for all members of the creative team and creates space for questions about consent that are hard to put into words. In this section, I will go through each of the five attributes that make up "FRIES" and how they integrate specifically with scenes of intimacy.

Freely Given

"F" is freely given, meaning that consent can only be given without coercion or force. There can be no "correct answer" to a question about consent. The spectrum of answers should be available with no perceived negative consequences for one answer over the other. The

entertainment industries glorify a culture of “yes and,” in which yes means good, and no means bad. “Yes” means forward, and “no” means stop. “Yes” is collaborative, and “no” is difficult. “Yes” will get them the next job, “no” will have them replaced. Within this narrative, the only choice that allows the actor to remain in good standing is to say yes, and there are perceived negative consequences for saying no. This produces a culture of silence in which actors adopt a grin-and-bear-it attitude and are separated from any agency in the situation. It turns consent into a binary in which someone either agrees to all or none.

As mentioned in chapter one, there are enormous power imbalances at play within the entertainment industry. There are situations in which the actor is also the director and the producer, where multiple people have multiple roles, and it is not always clear who is wearing what hat at any given moment. Those with a large amount of power on a production might be working all day with a background actor or ensemble member who is new to the industry and is in the early stages of establishing a reputation for their work. Situations such as these can create incredibly coercive power structures in which one party feels that their only option is to say “yes.” In this culture, the act of saying no or taking a step back could result in punitive measures, such as being fired and not hired again. Data shows us that white theatre artists are significantly more likely to be hired (and re-hired) than their Black counterparts. Other artists of color are also significantly less likely to be cast or re-hired when compared to white theatre artists.¹²⁹ When examining the perceived negative outcomes, BIPOC and artists from other underrepresented groups face much greater risks to their financial and professional well-being when speaking up

¹²⁹ Actors Equity Association, “Actors’ Equity Releases First-Ever Diversity Study Showing Disparities in Hiring in the Theatre Industry.”

about their boundaries if they are at risk of being perceived as a “bad collaborator.” The intersectional identities of populations that suffer from oppression compound greatly when it comes to consent and are a central part of the conversation when examining how best to advocate and support all actors of all bodies and abilities.

For consent to be freely given, the question itself must be free of coercive wording. Phrases such as “You’re ok with this, right?” implies that there is only one correct answer. The social pressure to say yes to a question that is phrased, such as this, is incredibly strong. This is the case, especially if the person is halfway through the action when they ask. I see this most often when someone is trying to demonstrate what they wish to do to the other person while simultaneously asking for their consent. Usually, this is not done maliciously; however, consent cannot be obtained during work and can only be obtained before the work; otherwise, the situation can quickly become coercive.

When trying to phrase consent questions in a non-coercive way, it is also important to illustrate that there are options, should the answer be no. One perceived negative consequence of saying no is that the entire production team will have to go back to square one if the actor doesn’t consent to the specific action. The actor can then feel pressured to choose between their safety and inconveniencing the entire creative team. When seeking consent, the answer of either yes, no, or maybe can be accepted graciously into the creative process. This can be done by presenting multiple options along with the caveat that if none of those options work, another one will be found and presented. Intimacy directors are particularly skilled with this type of communication, making them an invaluable member of the team for scenes of intimacy when the risk level is generally much higher.

During a production in which I was acting as the intimacy consultant (a term which is only used when offering advice regarding intimacy and consent on production, but that professional does not step into the rehearsal process to choreograph), the director approached me with a concern for one of the younger actors. The scene involved one character sexualizing the other character and stroking them on the pectoral muscle above clothing. One of the actors was in a position of power over the other actor in everyday life, which could easily affect their ability to give their full consent. I advised the director to offer at least three different options to the second actor to tell the story. In this case, the three options we decided were to make full contact with the pectoral, hover with tension just above the pectoral, or mime the gesture towards the audience and away from the character while maintaining full intention. All three of these options would tell the story of the first character sexualizing the second character, but not all of them involved physical contact or close proximity. If the director demonstrates enthusiasm for each option, then there is a significantly higher chance that the actor will feel free to choose the one that will make them feel the most confident on stage. If the offer is presented as: this is the one I want, but these others would be fine, then this still creates a power imbalance in which the actor is forced to not only protect themselves but also to manage and navigate the feelings of the director. By setting ego aside and engaging in the discussion collaboratively, the actor does not need to internalize the shame that often comes with asking for a modification or turning down an idea that makes them feel unsafe.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ If there is a specific stage picture or vision with regards to a scene of intimacy that the director is unwilling to move on, the best practice is to include this in an audition disclosure form so that those entering the production know that this is a non-negotiable part of the role. The more

While speaking about this work, I have had directors and instructors approach me, stating that they always tell their actors that no is an option. This is wonderful and a great step towards consent but cannot be the whole solution. Stating that no is an option is not the same as the lived experience that has told many actors that this can be a trap. There is a history in this industry of directors saying this but not supporting this in their actions. Trust is earned over time by repeating actions that validate “no” as a viable and collaborative response. There is no such thing as a blanket statement for building trust at the beginning of a rehearsal process. The industry is full of pressure from time, money, and egos – all of which create obstacles for freely given consent. There is no shortcut.

“Yes” means nothing unless “no” is an option. By creating space for the option of “no,” the response of yes becomes far more powerful. This allows trust to build within the ensemble and empowers the actors to ask for what they need to do their best work. When actors do not feel that no is an option, they often react in one of two ways. The first is that they become afraid to make choices for fear of crossing their partner’s boundaries. All parties may act conservatively to ensure that they are protecting each other. It can stifle risk-taking and, in some cases, eliminate spontaneity and impulse. The second is that it can generate actors who are not listening to one another and cause harm due to the lack of perception of boundaries. Actors act with too much abandon because they have received permission from the director to do so, even though they do not have consent from their scene partner(s). All actors have boundaries, and the

information that can be known ahead of time allows for actors to go into the project fully on board with the creative vision.

counterfactual denial of boundaries can lead to immense harm – physical and emotional – and decreases trust among collaborators.

Freely given consent cannot happen when drugs and alcohol are in the mix, especially within a work environment. Consent is attained when all parties have sound judgment. The use of drugs and alcohol during the work of performing simulated sex or scenes of intimacy or heightened exposure is highly unethical. There are numerous stories within the entertainment industry (particularly in the tv/film landscape) in which actors have a couple of shots of alcohol before filming scenes of intimacy to loosen up and get rid of their nerves. This is an incredibly dangerous practice that removes the ability to have active and informed consent and could have extremely negative effects on the performers and the production as a whole. Alcohol can mask and remove inhibitions and fears regarding the scene but limits the ability to legally give consent. Alternatively, open and collaborative boundary and consent conversations can build trust for more productive work. Again, the intimacy director/coordinator as a part of the rehearsal or pre-production process begins to work early in the process to establish trust, communication, and consent so that when the work is happening in the room, all parties are confident and able to stay fully present to their actions and their boundaries. Intimacy direction as a practice builds tools for communication that work to eliminate coercion and create a situation in which all actors can come to work feeling confident in the activities they are about to do and supported in the production of this work.

Reversible

Reversible consent is the understanding that all parties involved have the right to change their mind at any time. Consent can be retracted and/or revoked at any point in the process,

regardless of how many times the action has been performed previously. Reversible consent is for all parties involved in the action, not just the person receiving the action. Care is taken to not prioritize the consent and experience of one party over the other.

Performers often have to repeatedly perform a scene of intimacy, whether it is multiple times in a day for tv/film or once a day for several months as part of a live performance and rehearsal process. An actor may not realize that something is outside one of their boundaries until they have experienced it several times. As an example of this, that is non-intimate or linked to trauma— after the introduction of a microphone, an actor may realize that their skin has begun to develop a painful irritation due to the mic tape on their face. They would likely revoke their consent to wearing mic tape on their face, in which case a hair mic might be more appropriate.

I use these non-sexualized examples to invite empathy to this type of revokable consent. American theatre culture respects and understands physical danger and discomfort and is used to finding accommodations for physical injury. I often joke that no one is upset when I am wearing a cast and state that I do not wish to give them a high five, even if I've greeted them every morning prior with a high five. Physical injuries and boundaries make a certain amount of sense because most of us can empathize with that situation. For some, understanding emotional trauma is much more difficult as they may never have experienced emotional trauma, or if they have, they have repressed that trauma or been unable to name it at the time. An example of someone revoking a consent due to an emotional boundary could be that over time, a certain gesture has become triggering of some past trauma or event. This trigger is preventing them from doing their best work. In this case, they may revoke consent for an action that was previously fine. The work of the intimacy professional values the actor's emotional well-being just as much as their physical well-being.

When consent is reversed, it does not need to be justified. This is very difficult for many in practice. When saying “no,” and especially when revoking consent, there is usually pressure to justify this change and explain the reasoning. For some, the answer may be something that they are very willing to share, but for others, this can create a dangerous situation in which they feel pressured to disclose highly personal information and risk being attacked or judged negatively for it.

No one knows all of their boundaries at all times. Boundaries are often uncovered through experience and are not rigid over time. The ability to revoke consent is critical to the actor’s ability to explore and try new things. When actors do not feel as though they will be able to revoke consent, they are significantly more likely to only agree only to things that are well within their comfort zones, things that they feel confident will be ok without needing to try them. However, when consent is easily reversed, and that reversal is celebrated, actors are more likely to take risks. I use the word celebrated purposefully here to indicate that discovering new boundaries is an opportunity to cultivate joy.

Informed

All parties require information about what they are being asked to perform. Some of the most exciting stage directions for a director or a choreographer are ones that are deliberately vague. My personal favorite is some variation of “They have sex; it’s hot.” This communicates story and tone clearly while leaving the actors, director, and intimacy director to figure out the specifics of the movement and staging. However, with vague stage directions, it becomes very difficult to assess what is being asked of an actor both physically and emotionally, particularly when an actor is auditioning for a show. A stage direction such as “they have sex” could be put

on stage a thousand different ways, and the actors involved may only agree to a few of those iterations. When reading the script, the actors have very little information about what they will be asked to perform. If there is a very specific vision for the intimacy, it should be communicated as early in the process as possible.

Auditions are spaces in which consent can be extremely difficult to navigate and obtain. When applying “freely given” to consent, auditions create extremely pressurized situations in which the consequence of saying “no” is to not get the job. When the information is vague from the beginning, the actor may genuinely be saying that they are willing to tell the story of simulated sex until halfway through the rehearsal process when they find out the director wants them to be fully nude, in the round, under fluorescent lighting. At this point, the director may become even more frustrated with the actor reversing their consent because they said they’d do it in the audition. Without information, consent is not fully given or received. This miscommunication can play out in ways that harm all parties involved.

When an audition scene is intimate, the best practice is to find a place holder for any intimate contact between the auditionees. Asking actors to improvise intimacy during an audition is highly coercive and unethical and has great potential for coercion and assault. Additionally, the purpose of the audition is not to see how well the actors kiss one another (as this can be enhanced through the use of choreography and an intimacy director); it is to see if the actors have presence together, play off each other’s energy well, etc. Intimacy is a type of acting that can be manufacture over time with the assistance of a specialist.

Informed consent as a clear part of the audition process can greatly enhance the production from the very beginning. This is not to say that the director needs to have the work pre-choreographed at auditions, but information such as “the nudity will be highly visible,” or

the “this role requires full frontal nudity” can help ease communication early on and reduce the risk of revoked consent much later in the process. Often, audition forms only ask whether the performer is willing to perform while nude, but this question is vague and lacks the information needed to ensure active and informed consent. Many actors may be ok with only certain types of nudity and not others. When they say that they are ok with nudity, this could place the actor in a tricky situation in which the director feels as though the actor miscommunicated their boundaries, and the performer feels that they were misled during the audition process.

As I will discuss further in the next chapter, communication is another pillar of this work, and the more information that actors have ahead of time, the more agency they have to consent to specific actions. Helpful qualifiers for consent can include duration, speed, pressure, and quality of the touch being asked. This applies to any touch, not just intimate touches.

While I was working on a production, the actors worked through a moment in which one of the actors was going to squeeze the rear of the other actor. The actor who was receiving the squeeze required more information before consenting to the action. They wanted to know where on the rear the squeeze would be and the intensity of the pressure that would be used. Working together, the actor who was receiving the squeeze asked if their scene partner would demonstrate the intensity of the squeeze on their shoulder first to determine whether they wanted the pressure to stay the same, intensify, or decrease. After that, they asked if they could place their scene partner’s hand on the spot that would be best for them. This process allowed the actor to gather the relevant information about the touch before engaging in the action so that they were able to give full consent to the action.

Enthusiastic

The language of consent is more than just the verbal response of yes or no.

Communication of consent can be conveyed through tone, body language, and quality of response, among other factors. Enthusiastic consent is a term that is meant to describe the ease and confidence that all parties can develop when giving consent to engage in a specific action.

In situations where consent is not being freely given, the body can often manifest this lack of consent in several ways. This may occur when the answer of “no” is attached so closely with negative consequences that the parties involved do not perceive it as a valid response to the situation. The body language may alert the intimacy professional that this consent is not freely given, and it is not enthusiastically given. In some cases, this manifests as the actor physically removing their body part or a flinch. This response can be traced back to the flight/fight/or freeze response in the body’s nervous system. Flinching is an attempt to escape, a manifestation of “flight.”¹³¹ This action can be small, but it is a powerful indicator that the actor’s true feelings do not match their words. In this case, the intimacy professional is charged with creating a check-in moment to assess the situation, offer more clarity, or offer a pivot. The type of response will often change from situation to situation, and part of the training of an intimacy director is to build a catalog of possible ways to identify and handle these situations based on the given circumstances. My colleagues and I utilize the phrase “breathe and pivot” as a method for working through moments where boundaries shift, or the choreographic direction needs to be adjusted. The breath invites reflection and presence, and the pivot offers opportunities for creative development and collaboration.

¹³¹ Manitoba Trauma Information & Education Centre, “Fight, Flight, Freeze Responses.”

Sometimes, if there is a flinch, enthusiastic consent can be regained by clarifying the situation. The actor may not have expected the action to manifest in the way it did due to a miscommunication. For instance, the actor performing the action may be going at an unexpected speed. In this situation, all parties can discuss the expectation and re-clarify the action to restore enthusiastic consent. The assessment of expectations during collaborative work can be incredibly helpful for the building of trust and navigation of consent. Whether or not something meets expectations is not inherently a judgment of good or bad. It is simply information. After trying a new action, a partner may offer that the way that it played out did not meet their expectations but was, in fact, better for the story than what they were expecting. The group may choose to clarify the action to achieve better communication.

Non-enthusiastic consent may show up physically in several other ways as well. I have seen it most often manifest through tension within an actor's body, shortness of breath, or the eyes glazing over – a type of “freezing” response.¹³² This body language may also indicate a trauma response in the actor. These are all signs that the actor is not enthusiastically consenting. In my work, I refer to this type of behavior as “bearing down,” or the assumption that many actors make that this action will happen whether they want it to or not, so they had better grin and bear it. This mentality limits the actor’s agency and does not promote consent in the workplace.

Enthusiastic consent does not need to be all smiles and high energy. Enthusiasm can manifest in many ways and looks different in each body. I have come to understand enthusiastic consent as confidence in the expectations. Art is often uncomfortable and eliminating discomfort

¹³² Manitoba Trauma Information & Education Centre.

during the creation of art would be a disservice to its ability to explore difficult topics. However, all parties should feel confident in the actions they are about to perform and supported by the ensemble and directorial team. Enthusiasm is often found in a confident relaxation, and over time an ensemble creates a language together to convey enthusiastic consent.

Specific

Each actor has a right to declare boundaries that are specific to each situation at hand. This can mean that boundaries look different from day to day and production to production. Just because an actor agreed to nudity before does not mean that they will agree to nudity in the next production. Boundaries are informed by the situation and each specific set of given circumstances. An actor may agree to work using one method with one actor and request new boundaries and a new tempo with another actor.

Mainstream media offers several examples of how industry culture normalizes a lack of specific consent. A prominent example was found recently in an interview in which actress Emilia Clarke (Game of Thrones) on the podcast Armchair Expert with Dax Sheppard and Monica Padman. Clarke discusses her experience shooting nude and intimate scenes during the first season of Game of Thrones, a show which became famous for its graphic nudity and simulated sex. She explains that she relied heavily on costar Jason Momoa to tell her what her rights were when shooting a scene of intimacy. She lacked clear communication about what was expected both of her and her team on set. She was victim to a learned industry culture in which her needs were not seen as a priority. While now, she is one of the highest-paid actors in the world, she recalls that at the time, she felt as though she was “not worthy of requiring

anything.”¹³³ Clarke discusses how, since moving beyond Game of Thrones, other productions have leveraged her nudity during season one as a method to try and convince her to do more nudity in other projects.¹³⁴ This is a coercive practice in which actors (particularly women) are encouraged to perform nudity or high-risk simulated sex scenes as a means of bolstering their career. It can entice other productions to hire them due to their willingness to do nudity.

However, this ignores that consent is specific to each situation. Just because an actor agrees to do nudity or to perform simulated sex in one context does not mean that they consent to perform nudity or simulated sex in another context. Clarke was able to advocate for herself, achieving her wishes of less nudity in later seasons of Game of Thrones, and was able to assert her boundaries with later productions as well, but this type of agreement was assisted due to the vast amount of influence, power, and money that Clarke gained during her time on Game of Thrones. Due to her character's prominence, she held a great deal of power, which is rarely seen for background actors and day players or newcomers to the professional theatre market.

The FRIES acronym details five variables whose presence indicates consent. Each concept affects the other. While consent is a highly complex idea, particularly when it comes to legal consent, starting with an acronym like FRIES can open up discussions amongst an ensemble that name power dynamics, validate lived experiences, and prioritize the artists above the product.

¹³³ Song, “Emilia Clarke Was Told to Do Nude Scenes to Appease ‘GoT’ Fans.”

¹³⁴ Song.

Collaborative Consent: Building Trust

As an actor, advocating for one's boundaries and consent needs can be extremely challenging, especially in a culture that is just beginning to understand consent. Many in the entertainment industries refuse to acknowledge their power or disregard the need for consent. In particular, this narrative can be strong in academia, as some professors subscribe to the idea that the student must give up some of their freedom for the instructor to teach. They see the student as not being capable of knowing their limits and assume that they understand the student's limits better than they do. This is a tricky situation for many reasons, one being that most professors do have a large amount of data by which they can identify patterns and may be able to help a student differentiate between being uncomfortable and unsafe, but the denial of consent leads quickly to misuse of power, active harm, and abuse.

There are ways to communicate consent and boundaries that invite group collaboration and build trust instead of shutting down ideas without communication.¹³⁵ Utilizing some of these techniques can help to build trust within an ensemble while also preserving the integrity of one's boundaries and access needs. As an alternative to the "yes and" culture, artists can begin to practice "no, but" and "yes, but" or even "no, and." For example, to say "no but" is to declare a boundary while also offering the pivot. An example of this can be "no, you may not touch my shoulder, but you may hover your hand just above it." By offering a "but," the artist can demonstrate that they are interested in collaborating on an idea. There is a fear that if actors or students are allowed to say no, then that is the end of the discussion. This is especially true when

¹³⁵ In the next chapter, I offer the "discomfort scale" as a tool for helping actors grow artistically and discover their own boundaries and limits.

operating under the all or nothing binary of consent. Yes, is seen as progress and no is a halting of that progress. However, both yes and no have direction, energy, and flow. The response of “no” does not always need to invoke fear or even mean stop; it simply means, let's change direction.

Rejection is a powerful emotion, and for many, the idea of hearing no can induce shame, guilt, and fear. This complicates the person's ability to pivot from the request to a new request because it can instigate a shame spiral in which the person who asked for the action feels bad for causing their partner discomfort. However, the spiral may continue back to the other partner who feels bad for having said no and causing the first person to spiral in shame! In a world where no and yes are both equal options, one doesn't have to worry about whether they should have asked the question; they can ask for what they need to do their best work and have confidence that their scene partner will do the same. They need only feel bad for not listening to, believing, or respecting their partner's response.

Beyond the response of “no, but” there is also “no, and” in which an actor adds additional boundaries or clarification, such as “no you may not touch my left shoulder, and I request that we do not use my left arm at all in this choreography.” A response of “yes, but” may manifest as someone asking for clarification or specificity regarding trying. For instance, an actor may agree to be touched on the shoulder but request that the gesture be performed slowly at first. Regardless of whether the response begins with the words “no” or “yes,” these responses are all collaborative gifts. They are an agreement to explore the impulse and clarify how that exploration will occur in the room. The domination of “yes, and” implies that actors must fully embrace the impulse and then add onto it creatively with no space for adjustment or boundary

declaration. The use of “no, but” or “yes, but” or “no, and” or any other combination of these words (and more!) allows actors to fully embrace the impulse safely and confidently.

These are all examples of effective collaboration, as they offer more information for all parties to communicate and collaborate effectively. When these declarations are heard and receive positive reinforcement, it can build trust within the ensemble. Once the parties understand the boundaries, it can create the freedom to play and explore, knowing that the boundaries were heard and will be respected. When it comes to offering a pivot, it is the responsibility of all parties to be on the lookout for alternatives and to offer those alternatives freely. The work is always in the service of some story, and there are thousands of ways to tell each story. One can always re-anchor back to the story and move from there, finding alternatives and pivots that may tell the story even more effectively than the first option.

Consenting to Tell a Story vs. Consenting to a Specific Action

When power is viewed as a zero-sum game, consent can be intimidating to those who held most of that power before. Directors, professors, and producers can engage with this work by grappling with what it means to invite actor agency and how that affects their role and ability to work. Questions regarding the retraction of consent mid-project can induce fear in many whose livelihood depends on producing some final project. For many, the idea of working collaboratively and consensually during the rehearsal process is much easier to understand and comprehend than the idea of someone retracting consent halfway through the rehearsal process.

In practice, I distinguish between consenting to tell a story and consenting to a specific action. When an actor agrees to a role, they agree to use their body – and often their visage and likeness – to tell a story. Usually, they are playing a character that is not themselves. On a broad

level, they must agree to the story and agree to use their body and likeness to tell this story. Someone may be unable to consent to tell a story for several reasons. They may ethically disagree with the artistic vision and not wish to use their body or likeness to perpetuate a certain story. For example, some actors will agree to work on a Shakespearian play with certain directorial visions and may choose not to support other productions of the same play. For another actor, they may fully support that story, but they do not wish to use their body or likeness to tell the story due to religious or personal reasons. They may not want their relatives to see them engaged in the piece or have a partner who will be made uncomfortable by a specific portrayal. These factors affect whether or not an actor should even audition for the piece. Consent to telling the story is given first before an intimacy professional can work within a set of physical boundaries.

If an actor gives consent to the vision and the story but does not wish to perform a specific action, adaptations can support this boundary. For scenes of violence, actors use their bodies to tell the story of rage, combat, and often death. However, there is no expectation that the actor will be stabbed or that the actor will be punched in the face repeatedly night after night. These actors have consented to telling the story of violence, not to being physically harmed. This can be translated into stories of intimacy as well. Just because an actor has agreed to tell the story of a kiss does not mean that they will be required to make lip to lip contact with someone.

I offer a silly example of telling the story of a kiss that has been seen often in youth productions. The kiss itself is not required, but instead, the two actors duck their faces behind an open book, and the sound effect of a lip pucker is played. This effectively tells the story of the two characters kissing without the actors needing to make any contact.

While this example may seem inapplicable to theatre broadly, it is just one example of how one can effectively tell the story of a kiss without lip to lip contact. There are more advanced techniques than this that can sell the story of steamy, passionate love without the need for contact at all. In an interview by Elle Magazine, intimacy director and coordinator Sasha Smith discusses how physicality is particularly important for Black actors, and the support required to fully engage in consent requires the incorporation of these factors. She states, “If you look at the roles usually given to Black people, it’s usually a narrative surrounded with trauma. That is something that already lives in our bodies based on the society we are in. [It’s about] understanding the way our muscles hold emotions and how sometimes putting ourselves in these positions for these narratives can either re-traumatize or bring up heavy emotions that we haven’t even processed.”¹³⁶ The need for consent to tell a story and engage a specific action can support actors who may wish to tell the story but are also at a higher risk of being triggered by specific actions. For this reason, having a qualified intimacy director who understands the specific needs of the production and actors can support the safety of everyone in the room. Additionally, for these reasons, not all intimacy professionals can handle all scenes of intimacy, and part of the ethical standards of this include how and why we accept certain projects.

Because consent is reversible, if an actor chooses to revoke their consent for a specific action but still consents to tell the story in the tone envisioned by the director – then the creative team will be able to find a solution. This is why the intimacy director and/or coordinators' role involves movement direction (an idea that sometimes gets looked over in mainstream media representation of the role). A trained intimacy professional should be able to come up with a

¹³⁶ Candice Frederick, “Why Hollywood Needs More Black Intimacy Coordinators.”

multitude of options that work within the boundaries and still effectively tell the story of the piece. Depending on the timing and severity of the retraction of consent, this may require the intimacy choreographer to come back for an additional rehearsal to re-block parts of the scene. Some intimacy directors in the theatre will choreograph in a “plan b option.” In other cases where the retraction of consent does not greatly affect the choreography, adjustments can be made by the director, intimacy captain, or in some cases, the stage manager. The best practice is to include this in the rehearsal report and send it to the intimacy director to be aware of the changes that are being made to their choreography. They may also be able to offer support remotely.

If an actor becomes unable to consent to the story, there may be grounds for recasting the role. This can happen for a number of reasons, but the consent to telling the story is the foundation for collaborative working. If that is not there, then no matter what choreographic adjustments are made, the actor will not consent to the piece. If this happens, and the next course of action is to recast the part, it is best practice to thank the actor for stating their boundaries and reinforce that this will not affect their casting potential for future productions.

If someone withdraws their consent to tell a specific story, likely this is difficult for them as well. The worst-case scenario is not the retraction of consent, but the adoption of a “grin and bear it” attitude where the actor remains silent and proceeds with actions that cause them repeated harm. When actors operate through fear, they may opt to grin and bear it for a while until they cannot go on anymore. This may mean that they withdraw their consent further into the production, leaving less time for the cast and crew to recover, or that they incur lasting harm that affects their personal and professional well-being. It is always best to declare boundaries as soon as possible and adjust the consent agreement as soon as an issue arrives. During a

production with multiple runs a week, the “grin and bear it attitude” can do serious damage to the physical and emotional well-being of the actor, so much so that they may end up leaving the industry entirely, will have lost their voice and their creative vision. Instead, there is an opportunity to reinforce a culture of self-care in which the actor’s boundaries are respected, and they are celebrated for keeping themselves safe.

Communicating Boundaries Effectively and Assertively

Many intimacy practitioners have exercises for declaring boundaries. The key to all of them is to create a common language within each working space that is easy for all practitioners to use. One example of boundaries language is a color scale: red/green/yellow. Actors will indicate, on their own body, areas that are “green,” meaning these areas are open for free exploration within the context of the scene work. The actor will then indicate areas that are “yellow,” meaning that these areas require a conversation before contact can be incorporated into the work. Finally, the actor will indicate any areas that are “red,” meaning these areas are no-contact zones and should not be utilized during the scene work. This exercise's variations include one partner using the other partner’s hand to touch or hover around the green and yellow zones respectively and verbally indicate the red zones. In this variation of the exercise, it is important to remember that consent goes both ways and that just because one actor is ok being touched in a certain area does not mean that the other actor has given consent to touch that area.

Communication of expectations ahead of time can support the success of this exercise. What is most important about this language is that the partners specifically establish the areas that are each color. The boundary must be clear. I encourage actors to avoid vague gestures towards an area and instead be specific about where the green becomes yellow. This is all-important to the

information needed for consent to take place. If an actor indicates that their stomach is green, I encourage them to, with their partner, define the container of the stomach. Where does the stomach become the back? Where does the stomach become the rib cage? How are they using the word stomach to define a certain area on their body? It is often helpful for the partner to repeat what they heard, which can strengthen memory and indicate to their partner that their boundaries were heard and respected. This specificity builds trust and can also support the stage management team to take specific notes and have the language to write down.

Other practitioners will choose to forgo colors for the simplicity of indicating places that can be touched, places that can't be touched, and places that will need a conversation before the decision can be made. Again, the words themselves are not important, rather the continued communication regarding the type of touch and the areas that can be explored.

An alternative for indicating areas on the body can be to decide categories of gesture and contact. For example, agreeing to nothing more than pedestrian touch indicates that the characters won't engage in anything more than might happen between two formal business colleagues or contact between strangers in a grocery store. This sets a base expectation for the types of touches that will be allowed in the space but may negate the need for a full declaration of boundaries. Knowing the category of touch will also illuminate if there are clarifications or additional boundaries that need to be addressed. For instance, if I do not wish for my hands to be touched, and the category for the work is pedestrian touch, I should indicate that I have an additional boundary – my hands. FairPlay MN uses this type of boundary declaration for navigating consent during improvised comedy shows to great effect ¹³⁷.

¹³⁷ Fair Play MN, "About Fair Play."

Not all boundaries are relevant for all scenes and all types of work. When boundary work is being practiced, it is often practiced so that the parties explore declaring the boundaries for the entire person. Except for instances like exploring contact improvisation, the full-body boundary declaration is seldom needed. Instead, the scene's context can offer insight to decide which boundaries may or may not be relevant to the scene at hand. If the story is a hug between friends, there is a good chance that the boundary on my left pinky toe is not necessary to bring up. However, this is a highly personal decision, and all boundaries should be welcomed to the space regardless of their perceived relevance in the moment.

Consent is reversible and specific. These boundaries are allowed to change and be adjusted regularly throughout the rehearsal and performance period. Generally, I don't recommend exercises that involve coloring tangible body maps or creating documented boundary declarations as it can give a false sense that the boundaries are set in stone once they have been stated. For consent to occur, all parties must support the exploration and clarification of boundaries as it pertains to the work. As scenes grow and develop, discoveries may warrant adjusting the creative vision, which in turn may necessitate a new discussion of the boundaries. With practice, this conversation can be extremely quick and efficient and enhance the space's collaborative energy.

As mentioned above, when a boundary is declared, there is often an accompanying need to justify or explain the boundary – often in an apologetic tone. This comes from a long cultural history in which boundaries are perceived as negative traits. An actor would have to prove and justify why their boundary will allow them to be better practitioners in the space. For some, explaining the boundary is not a huge deal, and they may even wish to share a funny story regarding an injury or commiserate about the discomfort of stomach touching. However, when

the cultural norm is that the boundary is justified, it can create dangerous situations for those who do not wish to explain their boundary.

In support of cultural change, the practice of intimacy direction encourages boundary declarations without explanation. This reinforces that a boundary is a boundary, regardless of its reasoning or justification, or the other participants understanding of the reasoning or justification. Boundaries are treated the same way regardless of the justification for the boundary, so the justification does nothing to add to the conversation. It may be important to qualify or clarify a boundary – it may be ok to touch an area lightly, but not ok to grab an area. Still, this qualification is regarding the clarity of the boundary, not the justification for the boundary itself.

Consent is an extremely nuanced and difficult concept, and the obstacles for navigating consent in the rehearsal room are numerous. For many, the introduction of consent can be scary, as it makes visible all of the ways in which a mistake could be made. However, it also highlights all of the places that *can* be touched and the areas that are open for creative exploration. When the boundaries are clearly defined, and consent is active and present, it can create a more vibrant exploration of physicality and character and invites free-flowing conversation about the story and vision.

For those who have been recently introduced to the concepts of consent in practice, I often see them making jokes about how they have to ask consent for *everything* now. Two actors joke about having a boundary on their finger, and the other grabs the area, and they laugh. These jokes are a coping mechanism for the discomfort of realizing that boundaries are important and real. I caution jokes regarding people's boundaries and consent as they tend to reinforce the problematic notion that a conversation about consent and boundaries is worthless and unhelpful to the collaborative environment. If the situation becomes awkward or uncomfortable, I

encourage a return to the breath as a tool for dealing with discomfort without minimizing the task at hand. When consent is implemented effectively, it can be one of the most freeing forces for creativity, and there is a risk that a misplaced joke can dismantle trust and reinforce problematic systems of power. Actors lose their voice and their agency and often either bear down or leave the production.

This is not to say that explicit verbal consent is required before every action, every time. We'd never be able to perform scene work if this were the case! As trust is built and expectations are met, actors can check in with each other at the top of the rehearsal or before a performance to simply ask if there is any new information needed to maintain mutual safety.

Consent is built through trust. Trust is fostered over time when it is clear that all boundaries will be respected. The process cannot begin at the short check-in because the trust hasn't been established. Adrienne Maree Brown, in her book *Emergent Strategy*, offers that collaboration and ensemble building must "move at the pace of trust."¹³⁸ This concept offers that as ensembles work together and have more and more interactions in which a boundary is declared and that declaration is celebrated, trust will become available. When trust is the foundation of the relationship, two actors know that if they need to adjust, they can do so freely and immediately. However, trust cannot be assumed. It is earned. It is earned over time and through practice and repetition of care. Trust comes from knowing someone well and believing that they are mutually seeking a common good. It requires honesty from both parties throughout the process.

¹³⁸ brown, *Emergent Strategy*.

Consent is not exclusive to scenes of intimacy; it is incorporated into our creative industries' very fabric. It is applied to scenes of violence, scenes of intimacy, and all of the scenes in between. One does not have to be an intimacy choreographer to utilize the language of consent in the rehearsal hall or the production space. Additionally, the intimacy choreographer cannot be the only member of the team with an understanding of consent. In this cultural moment, many intimacy directors are the ones to enter into a room and establish consent as a foundational practice. Over time, I hope that this will not need to be the intimacy professional's responsibility but will instead already exist before bringing the intimacy director into the process. The responsibility of prioritizing consent in the creative process belongs to everyone. Using the intimacy director as a scapegoat or consent enforcement dilutes the power of consent and autonomy as a dynamic creative force. The inclusion of an intimacy practitioner is an opportunity for the entire production team to commit to utilizing consent practices for the entire show.

CHAPTER 4: COMMUNICATION

In their work, “The Pillars,” authors Alicia Rodis, Tonia Sina, and Siobhan Richardson designate “Communication” as one of the five pillars of intimacy direction. These five pillars offer a roadmap for key areas to be developed by an intimacy director and the intimacy direction profession. While acting as Associate Director of Intimacy Directors International, I co-authored the shortened one-page document “The Pillars of Intimacy Direction” based on the much longer document created by Sina, Richardson, and Rodis. This one-pager became Intimacy Directors International’s most widely distributed document and was available for anyone to download from the website. Additionally, it was distributed in workshops and across the country and globe. In this document, in reference to the pillar of communication, IDI asserts that “there must be open and continuous communication between the director, intimacy director, stage management and actors. This communication includes but is not limited to discussion of the scene, understanding of the choreography, continued discussion throughout the rehearsal period, frequent check-ins during the run, and openness to dissent any actions in the process. Avenues for reporting harassment must be made available to the entire ensemble.”¹³⁹ This brief definition highlights the myriad of ways communication can affect the production of scenes of intimacy. Communication includes verbal and non-verbal communication, such as tonality, timing, and body language. While communication is an expansive field of research in and of itself, in this dissertation, I focus on how communication can create safe and brave spaces for the ethical production of scenes of intimacy.

¹³⁹ Intimacy Directors International, “The Pillars.”

Effective communication strategies can be mobilized for the activation of consent in rehearsal and performance spaces. The role of the intimacy director provides a specialized skillset for the hyper-sensitive communication that is essential for these high-risk scenes and can facilitate dialogue between all parties involved so that voices are empowered, and information is received and understood effectively.

Using Ben E Benjamin and Cherie Sohnen-Moe's, *The Ethics of Touch* as a guide to communication for those who work in somatic professions, this chapter will address how intimacy directors utilize communication tools to establish a transparent working environment, maintain boundaries, and effectively intervene when boundaries are violated. The chapter also examines how a critical engagement with concepts and practices encouraging diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility can guide an intimacy director's communication towards sustainable advocacy. Finally, the chapter provides resources on stewarding trauma so that those who are affected or interact with someone who has been affected by trauma can engage with storytelling safely and sustainably. These sections highlight communication as a specialization necessary for the role of intimacy director and invite all practitioners who engage in scenes of intimacy to interrogate their communication strategies for more effective collaboration.

Creating a Transparent Working Environment and Communication Flow

The intimacy direction movement directly names and responds to the power imbalances deeply ingrained into the fabric of entertainment spaces. These power dynamics and their documented abuses¹⁴⁰ have created an environment where effective communication can be

¹⁴⁰ See chapter 1 for more information regarding power dynamics in the theatre.

difficult to establish, even with the best intentions. Whether actively abused or not, these power dynamics create a standard that rewards actors who do not advocate for their body autonomy and stifles the ability to apologize effectively, access forgiveness, and repair relationships. The intimacy professional supports the establishment of a transparent working environment to combat the negative effects of these strong power differentials through three key areas: de-stigmatizing and de-personalizing the story of intimacy, facilitating collaboration beyond the power dynamic of actor and director, and establishing the policies and protocols in place for the safety and accountability of the production. When addressed effectively, these three areas can set up an environment that prioritizes body-autonomy and allows for faster and more efficient collaboration.

Intimacy can be a difficult subject to discuss, as it is highly stigmatized in our society. One cannot ignore the policing of sexuality throughout American history and how this has created an inability to discuss sexuality, genitals, or sexual health openly and without stigma. The puritan values inflicted by those in power during western colonization and maintained over time consider sex to be exclusively for procreation. Patricia Hill Collins, in her book *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, call out these values, stating that a dominant perception of acceptable sexuality is when “sex occurs only between men and women, and is only valid within the confines of heterosexual marriage.”¹⁴¹ She addresses the disproportionate effect these values have on Black bodies and our ability to talk about Black sexuality in particular. This powerful and dominant narrative creates a stigma around sexual pleasure and non-procreative sex in American culture and silences the ability to speak openly

¹⁴¹ Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*.

about a broad range of sexualities and identities. It ties sexuality to morality and encourages silence for fear of being seen as sexually deviant.

These systems of value affect more than just the ability for society to talk openly about sexuality, sexual health, and sexual exploitation. It also affects the ability for creatives to talk openly about simulated sex, as the topic often requires discussion of genital comfort, barriers, and the simulation of sex acts that are otherwise socially locked within the confines of a private home. During scenes of nudity and/or simulated sex, productions are asking that actors betray these puritan values by putting that sexuality on display, which also often comes with the added risk (especially for recorded media) that their image or likeness will be spread across the internet and/or used for nefarious activities. The culture's inability to talk openly about sex can create a dangerous environment for those performing simulated sex acts. This culture can positively reinforce actors who stay silent and encourage the repression of feelings of discomfort and harm. In addition to the emotional risks of trauma, this can inadvertently promote physical risks such as the passing of sexually transmitted infections.

Regarding scenes of intimacy, actors are often asked to bring themselves to the role and may feel pressured to share their own sexual preferences with their collaborators due to the lack of general sexuality knowledge. As a member of the creative team, the intimacy director contributes their specialized knowledge to the overall vision of the piece and can help facilitate creative discussion about the scene and the characters in a way that does not ask someone to disclose their sexual preferences, fantasies, or curiosities. The intimacy professional frames the discussion from the lens of the character and offers sexual dramaturgy as an alternative to personal disclosure. By de-personalizing the discussion of the story of intimacy, all parties can more freely contribute to the piece's vision without personal and unnecessary emotional risk. As

an intimacy director, I work to re-direct conversations that are moving in a direction that could put someone in the unsafe position of disclosing their sexuality unnecessarily or speaking to their own experience unwillingly. This may come in the form of rephrasing a question someone has asked or reminding the group that we have agreed to center this conversation around the story and not include personal anecdotes.

Once the story is understood and presented from the lens of the character, it becomes easier to discuss the physical components that will be needed to tell this story on stage. All parties must be empowered to speak their boundaries and listen to their collaborators' boundaries. As I discussed in the previous chapter, consent is deeply influenced by the power dynamics present in the entertainment industry. The role of the intimacy director acts as an actor advocate to help support clear and effective communication so that all parties understand how to work collaboratively. The intimacy director, in the role of facilitator, can offer tools in-the-moment that support personal autonomy and check for consent regularly throughout the rehearsal process.

One such method that I have used to great effect is to ensure that I have at least one short conversation with each actor in private and create space for them to voice the things that make them feel confident about the scene work and also to identify obstacles that may interfere with their ability to do their best work. This conversation takes place in confidence to limit the perceived negative consequences of voicing boundaries.¹⁴² Actors are then empowered to speak

¹⁴² Intimacy direction is less effective if this conversation is used as a way to gain information power over the director. Privacy is necessary for an actor to speak freely outside the power dynamic, but this space should not be used to hide information necessary to the creative process.

more assertively, knowing that they have an advocate in their corner. By setting a tone of transparency, advocacy, and communication early, the rehearsal process can be affected for the better.

In some cases, the intimacy director may need to step in and pause an action to address proper communication techniques. In practice, this can look like one actor attempting to demonstrate their intentions on another actor without asking for their consent first. In this case, the intimacy director may interrupt and ask that the actor describe what they intend to do with words first. They may then turn to the other actor and ask if they would like to try that or if they need more clarification. Movements can be qualified by duration, intensity, pressure (among others), and these qualifications will affect whether or not the actor gives their consent. This and other methods of communication can be established early and decided collaboratively to build trust amongst the ensemble. The same methods of communication will not be effective with every ensemble. Some actors are looking for extensive verbal agreements before acting; others prefer non-verbal methods of communication, looser containers, and more room for

The intimacy director can use this time with the actor to help clarify boundaries, support communication strategies that the actor can use with the director and establish language that makes the actor feel confident in the rehearsal room. With this knowledge, the intimacy director will be able to *facilitate* a conversation between the actor and director, not have the conversation *for* the actor. If the intimacy director uses this information to speak for the actor or act as middle person, this can create the opposite effect of divisiveness and inhibit the ability to cultivate trust as a creative team. It can foster fear of overstepping boundaries when it is perceived that only the intimacy director has all of the information.

improvisation. Both methods can be effectively utilized if they are communicated clearly. This ensures the safety of the practitioners and can also prevent rapid escalation of impact when boundaries are crossed.

The intimacy director also communicates the policy and protocol structures in place to support the entire creative team – and if they have not been established, they can help facilitate their creation. As it stands, the current guidelines set by the leading actors union, Actors Equity Association (AEA), have extremely limited language surrounding scenes of intimacy, and non-union theatres have even less oversight. In this early phase of professionalizing this role, intimacy directors have taken on the responsibility of supporting the establishment of policies and protocols that support the safety of the creative team (if the theatre has not already done so themselves). In cases where the theatre has established their own more stringent policies, the intimacy director can then bring those policies actively into the rehearsal space, reminding all parties of their resources and integrating them as a part of the process, rather than simply a piece of paper on a bulletin board or in a handout.

When working with scenes of intimacy, the risk for sexual harassment is higher than in other scenes. Since the #metoo movement went viral in 2017, stories of sexual harassment have become a much more widely discussed subject. When working on a scene of intimacy, there are extra precautions to ensure that the work remains professional. The entertainment industry treads a line that most other professional industries do not have to tread: the line between creative freedom and sexual harassment. By understanding this line, the intimacy director can help create an informed creative team (occasionally with the assistance of a legal department) so that everyone feels they can work creatively without putting their co-workers at risk.

There are two most common types of sexual harassment: quid pro quo harassment and hostile work environment harassment.¹⁴³ Quid pro quo harassment describes scenarios in which sexual favors are asked for in return for career advantages. This can be soliciting sex acts in return for promotions or even referrals to other workplaces. The creative industries are particularly susceptible to this misapplication of referent power due to the industry's reliance on informal networks.¹⁴⁴ These networks are understood as a part of the industry, meaning that the more someone is liked, the better chance they will have at a job. This power differential can be easily abused to create spaces where Quid Pro Quo harassment is simply a part of the industry, rather than a malicious abuse of power. As discussed in an earlier chapter, it can be incredibly difficult to turn down sexual advances when that person could hold the keys to job security in a field that has limited security in general. Quid pro quo harassment does not need to be direct. It can be implied. Harvey Weinstein is one of the most famous examples of this type of harassment. He was able to prey on several women in the entertainment industry, using the promise of either association or disassociation (often in the form of firing) to coerce them into participating in sex acts.¹⁴⁵

“Hostile Work Environment” harassment is created when behaviors make the workplace intolerable based on sexual or gendered activities.¹⁴⁶ This can be regular jokes being made that degrade a certain gender or sexual orientation and direct aggressions against a certain gender

¹⁴³ Enright, “Identifying and Preventing Harassment in Your Workplace.”

¹⁴⁴ Hennekam and Bennett, “Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries.”

¹⁴⁵ Marling, “Harvey Weinstein and the Economics of Consent.”

¹⁴⁶ Enright, “Identifying and Preventing Harassment in Your Workplace.”

group or sexual orientation. There are often certain learned behaviors in the creative industry that, over time, are perceived as normal or part of the work. Claims of hostile workplace harassment are often dismissed due to the perception that creatives must be allowed to create and cannot be censored.¹⁴⁷ However, when those in power are homogenously white and male, these learned industry standards create an incredibly hostile work environment for minority groups, in addition to preventing them from speaking out about it.

Understanding these types of harassment can inform how the creative vision can be discussed during the work without crossing the lines of hostile workplace harassment or quid pro quo harassment. If the show is about sexuality, it is likely – if not necessary – that sexuality is discussed throughout the piece. When it comes to harassment, content relevant to the work is *not* considered sexual harassment. However, if the jokes, comments, or stories exceed direct relevance to the work being created, it can be harassment. Harassment is decided by the victim, not the intentions of the perpetrator. It is imperative that all members of the creative team consent to tell the story at hand so that they can give their informed consent to participate in necessary creative discussions. If the concept of sex toys and vibrators makes someone feel unsafe, they may wish to turn down the offer to work on *In the Next Room: or the Vibrator Play* as the content will likely cause them harm.

A famous example of this dilemma occurred within the television show *Friends*. Their writers' room underwent a legal case in which the writers were accused of creating a hostile work environment as they recounted their sexual exploits; however, the courts ruled against this as sexual harassment due to the fact “that vulgar and coarse comments by the show’s writers

¹⁴⁷ Hennekam and Bennett, “Sexual Harassment in the Creative Industries.”

reflected the ‘creative workplace’ for a comedy with sexual themes.¹⁴⁸ Understanding the context of the work is central to the communication of the story and the safety of all those involved in the production.

By keeping the conversation character-driven and professional, the intimacy director may also provide some legal benefits to the production in addition to safety benefits for the collaborators. Sometimes a director may have benign intentions, but when asking an actor to do something, it could be perceived as quid pro quo harassment. The policy that performers receive no less than 24 hours’ notice before rehearsing a scene is an example of how communicating policy early in the rehearsal period can prevent instances of sexual harassment. Urgent time constraints can foster coercive power dynamics in which actors are pressured to agree due to lack of time and lack of information. By ensuring a minimum of 24 hours’ notice, the time pressure is diluted so that the actor can seek additional advocacy or ask for what they need to do their best in rehearsal the next day. The intimacy director may also suggest a rehearsal process that gradually reduces the number of clothes used in rehearsal during the scene of nudity overtime to support the desensitization of the performer. Still, even in this case, there should be 24 hours’ notice before the performer is asked to perform fully nude. In addition to the 24 hours’ notice, the performer should understand how the nudity will be handled, the positioning of robes or cover that may be needed backstage, as well as who is handling the robes/cover backstage. This information supports not only the actor but the crew as well, who will know when nudity will happen, where that person will go, and who is interacting with that person so that they can fully

¹⁴⁸ Dolan, “High Court Dismisses ‘Friends’ Harassment Lawsuit.”

consent to interact with the nudity as well. The communication of this policy effectively is preventative in that it troubleshoots problems before they have had a chance to emerge.

Establishing a pathway of reporting supports actor agency, regardless of the intentions of the collaborators, to create effective communication strategies. The power dynamics in this industry are strong, and access to reporting creates a system of checks and balances that can limit the abuse of power dramatically. Reporting should be used when trust has been lost, and one party feels as though they would be unsafe, opening the conversation to the person who caused them harm. However, direct communication should be used whenever possible.

For scenes of intimacy, the intimacy director can support direct communication by acting as a key facilitator rather than a punitive or disciplinary body. The intimacy director can encourage group accountability and model effective communication strategies. However, in some cases where the power dynamics are deeply skewed from the beginning or communication breaks down, this may be an inaccessible option for the parties involved. Reporting may provide additional resources needed to facilitate safety for the ensemble. All members of the ensemble and production team should be able to name the pathways for reporting sexual harassment or assault. These reporting pathways should be communicated and easily accessed throughout the entire working relationship and should be distributed both verbally and physically in the form of handouts, signage, and/or email notification.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Stage Management Students at UC Irvine use a web-style document to demonstrate the different people who are available as resources. They color code the document to delineate lines of power and offer encouragement for all collaborators to seek the assistance that they need in order to do their best work. Please see Appendix A for more details.

Intimacy coordination and direction is not a panacea for safety during scenes of intimacy, but it can greatly support the process. Intimacy professionals must be present to assist in the production and safety of scenes of intimacy, but this work can only be done when the rest of the production team also reflects on their communication strategies and is prepared to work collaboratively. Transparency is the key to making effective lines of communication and pathways for reporting and preventing harassment in the workplace. Implementing effective communication strategies early in the rehearsal process can diffuse a conflict before it escalates into a situation that requires reporting and provides time for the ensemble to practice these strategies and demonstrate accountability to cultivate trust. When working efficiently, the conversation is free-flowing and fully collaborative, mistakes are addressed right away, and all parties feel as though their needs are fully met. For scenes of intimacy, the risks of not communicating are extremely high, and utilizing an intimacy director early in the process provides the best chance for successful, safe, and ethical performance.

Establishing and Maintaining Boundaries

The effective declaration and maintenance of boundaries are at the heart of building trust as an ensemble and working sustainably in performance. As discussed in the previous chapter, Planned Parenthood names “information” as part of the definition of consent.¹⁵⁰ All parties must understand what the request is and the boundaries for them to effectively agree to the action. Consent agreements necessitate a system of communication that acknowledges and attempts to mitigate the negative effects of strong power differentials. This system is also reinforced with

¹⁵⁰ Planned Parenthood, “All About Consent.”

accountability structures that promote self-reflection and relationship repair for when boundaries are crossed.

In their book *The Ethics of Touch*, Dr. Ben E Benjamin and Cherie Sohnen-Moe offer strategies for maintaining healthy boundaries for any who work in the somatic professions. While their work speaks directly to physical therapists, massage therapists, and health practitioners that regularly engage in professional touch, this methodology is easily transferred to a profession in which actors often regularly engage in professional physical contact and maintain the character relationship as a separate relationship from themselves as actors. Most actors do not receive emotional health and/or boundary training as a part of their actor education, leaving a gap in safe practices for professional touch. The role of the intimacy director is to assist in boundary maintenance, both physical and emotional, for the promotion of better storytelling and actor safety.

When looking to maintain boundaries, Benjamin and Sohnen-Moe distinguish between three qualities of communication: passive, aggressive, and assertive. Looking at these categorizations can offer clarity as to why not all communication is effective. They advocate for assertive language, placing assertive communication as the happy-middle-ground between aggressive and passive. They argue that utilizing aggressive language to declare a boundary leads to defensiveness on the part of the listener. When one party feels attacked, they may either lash out at others or develop shame around the situation. Aggressive language has undertones of anger. In the context of the theatre, an example of aggressive language can be, “How dare you grab my wrist during that scene when I explicitly told you not to? I’m going to have you fired.” Aggressive language can lead to isolation in which the party receiving the feedback becomes

fixated on remembering what they cannot do, which makes it even more difficult to maintain the stated boundaries.

On the other hand, Benjamin and Sohnen-Moe argue that passive language has undertones of inadequacy and low self-esteem in which the person declaring their boundaries undermines their declaration. In the context of entertainment, passive language might look like, “I really hope that next time you can try to keep your hand above my waist during the kiss.” Passive language neutralizes the importance of the boundary. This communication decreases the permanence of the boundary and frames it as more of a guideline.

Alternatively, assertive language “communicates clearly with minimal emotional content,” meaning that the “assertive person maintains dignity, self-worth, self-respect, and self-satisfaction without dominating or belittling people.”¹⁵¹ Declaring and maintaining boundaries is one of the most difficult parts of truly collaborative working. It is something that people are regularly struggling with, even in a workshop setting. People often default to not asserting their boundaries for the risk of hurting someone’s feelings or being seen as a difficult actor/collaborator. Therefore, it is a part of the role of the intimacy director to facilitate the creation of boundaries for the work that will be done and to encourage assertive boundary maintenance as a necessary part of scenes of intimacy.

Benjamin and Sohnen-Moe offer a specific method for establishing boundaries for effective collaboration, known as the agreement discussion. This discussion occurs before physical work and creates space for all parties to clarify what is being asked of them, state what they feel confident trying, and establish any firm boundaries necessary to keep one another safe

¹⁵¹ Sohnen-Moe and Benjamin, *The Ethics of Touch*.

during the work. The agreement discussion is broken down into five components: What, Why, Consequences, Obstacles, and Recap.¹⁵²

When addressing the “What,” all parties should understand the boundaries clearly through the context of the scene. This can take many different shapes; some actors wish to go over their entire body, labeling areas as “ok for touch,” “not ok for touch,” and “maybe ok for touch, but more information will be needed at the moment before consent is given,” some use color-coded language for similar clarification, such as labeling the above zones as green, red, and yellow, respectively. Other times, it may be more effective to talk through each of the actions before working with them physically instead of speaking about blanket boundaries. The method for declaring boundaries can be determined specifically for each scene, and the working group and the intimacy director can offer alternatives and methods for effectively communicating boundaries. All parties should know what to expect from the scene and have an opportunity to voice any boundaries that they are aware of or discover along the way.¹⁵³ During this conversation, it is most effective to state boundaries in a way that reinforces what *can* be done in addition to only stating what cannot be done. This invites the actors to remember all of the freedom that they do have, rather than fixating on the parts that are off-limits. Actors should refrain from using abstractions or qualifiers, such as “I’d really like it if we could...” This is passive language and can undermine the firmness of the boundary. When possible, actors should employ assertive language, “you may touch between my bicep to my wrist.”

¹⁵² Sohnen-Moe and Benjamin.

¹⁵³ We don’t always know our boundaries, and space for boundary discovery should be incorporated into intimate scene work.

Once the “What” has been established, the next step in the agreement discussion is to address the “Why.” As mentioned in the previous chapter, boundaries do not need to be justified. This “Why” does not ask *why* the boundary exists but instead asks all parties to reinforce how the maintenance of that boundary will support the process. Often this can be as simple as stating, “by respecting this, I’ll be able to do my best work.” Sometimes this can be an artistic “why,” for example, “by putting your hand on my shoulder, I’ll be able to reach around you to grab the teapot.” This is an opportunity for the collaborators to remind each other that they are all pursuing the same goal – effective storytelling and artistry. No one is declaring a boundary to be difficult; boundaries are offerings to one another for effective collaboration. Actively listening to and respecting someone’s boundaries increases trust and supports safe and ethical working conditions.

The third step is to establish and agree to the consequences of overstepping a boundary. This does not necessarily need to be something punitive and can instead be an agreement between the parties that if a boundary is crossed, it will be addressed immediately and that the run of the scene will momentarily pause. By stating this upfront, a pause in the rehearsal is not seen as “slowing down the work” but is then a part of the work. Other consequences may be that if the boundary is overstepped, the person who did the overstepping will immediately apologize without necessitating an explanation. Establishing consequences has been highly stigmatized in the entertainment spaces as it is often associated with punitive measures and shame, but by depersonalizing the consequences, collaborators establish tools that can be easily implemented throughout the rehearsal process.

The penultimate step asks that all parties identify obstacles that may make the stated boundaries difficult to work within. This step allows collaborators to troubleshoot problems

before they occur, particularly when dealing with rigid safety boundaries. Obstacles may include physical coordination difficulties, stage setup, or safety constraints. In particular, the speed of a gesture and its need for accuracy may become an obstacle to ensure that all boundaries are upheld. The awareness of obstacles, and their open discussion, can increase sensitivity between the two actors and encourage confidence to try the scene.

Once these steps have been completed, all parties can repeat and summarize each other's boundaries and the agreement for this scene. This simple repetition of the agreement solidifies the plan and builds trust between the partners. It signals that the priority is safety and storytelling and can help foster trust between the collaborators. As detailed by Benjamin and Sohnen-Moe, the agreement conversation provides a healthy foundation for working in which communication is clear, and all boundaries have been addressed. This framework is flexible and creates space for boundaries to shift during the creative process as long as all parties can go through these steps to reaffirm the boundary agreement. By incorporating these five elements into a boundary agreement for scenes of intimacy, all parties are more informed and can give their full consent.

Boundary agreements should become a regular part of intimate scene-work and can be maintained through frequent check-ins. The type of boundary check-in needed is directly tied to the trust that has been built between those engaging in the contact. Trust cannot be manufactured and can only come about organically. At the beginning of a rehearsal process with actors who may not know each other very well, the full boundary agreement should be utilized and repeated regularly. As work goes on and the actors become more confident, the boundary check-in may only need to be a quick moment to ask if anything has changed since the last work session. Regardless of the trust between the two players, at the very least, a small check-in is required, as boundaries can and will shift over time. Trust is built by understanding that one's scene partner

will listen to and respect one's boundaries regardless of where they are, how they have shifted, or when they have shifted.

Intervention When Boundaries are Crossed

When boundary maintenance is reframed as something positive and collaborative, then addressing a crossed boundary can be seen as a collaborative gift, rather than a shameful reprimand. It is only recently that there has been an emergence of strategies in the professional world meant to de-personalize mistakes so that they can be quickly and effectively addressed to build trust. The Chicago Theatre Standards, a document written for non-equity theatres in Chicago, by the non-profit group Not in Our House, and spearheaded by Laura Fisher and Lori Myers, takes on some of these issues in the particularly unregulated spaces like storefront theatres in Chicago. Actors Equity Association does not have control over these spaces, leading to rampant sexual harassment and abuse of power. I discuss this group and the Chicago Theatre Standards in the introduction to draw attention to the cultural moment in which intimacy direction found a foothold as its professional area. However, the work done by Not in Our House offers additional resources for intimacy directors and all theatrical collaborators to communicate more effectively with one another. The Chicago Theatre Standards advocates for a system known as “Oops/Ouch,” which they describe below:

“We’d like to recommend a system of “Ouch” and “Oops.” For instance: Speaker A is trying too hard to be funny and makes a thoughtless remark. Speaker B says “Ouch!” This cues Speaker A to realize that the funny remark was potentially hurtful. Speaker A says “Oops” to indicate recognition and regret. Then there’s a Pause. It’s up to the Ouch-caller whether this moment requires some conversation. So maybe there’s a conversation – or maybe the Ouch caller says “Cool, let’s move on.” But the decision to move on must come from the Ouch-

caller. Please note that anyone in the room can call “Ouch.” It does not have to come from the person who is the focus of the potentially hurtful remark” ¹⁵⁴.

This “Oops/Ouch” system is just one method for communicating crossed boundaries and may be a part of the “consequences” discussion during the boundary agreement. Before working, all parties understand and agree to the strategy being used to address boundary violations. This is not meant to scare, but rather to increase information and understanding and create accessible tools.

Another example of a tool for addressing boundary violations comes from intimacy director Adam Noble, who, in 2011, wrote a paper for the Fight Master Magazine entitled *Sex and Violence: Practical Approaches for Dealing with Extreme Stage Physicality*. In this piece, Noble demonstrates how a safe word might be employed as a cue to the actors that the scene needs to stop, and the boundaries need to be reassessed.¹⁵⁵ By using a benign word, Noble offers “kiwi” as an example; actors can express that they need to stop without using words that tend to trigger shame reactions in others, such as “stop” or “don’t.” Additionally, by using a word outside the context of the scene, it won’t be confused as a part of the scene itself.

Benjamin and Sohnen-Moe offer a more extensive approach than the safe word or “Oops/Ouch” method called the “Assertion Sequence” in which their “Agreement Discussion” is placed in context as the first of a series of four, increasingly forceful conversations that can be used to address repeated boundary violations.¹⁵⁶ The four conversations are listed as follows:

- 1) Agreement Discussion
- 2) Follow Up

¹⁵⁴ Not in Our House, “Chicago Theatre Standards.”

¹⁵⁵ Noble, “Sex & Violence: Practical Approaches for Dealing with Extreme Stage Physicality.”

¹⁵⁶ Sohnen-Moe and Benjamin, *The Ethics of Touch*.

- 3) Confrontation Meeting
- 4) Termination

It is unlikely that a boundary will never be crossed, and boundaries may also emerge throughout the rehearsal process as actors learn more about themselves or experience external stimuli in their lives that affect their working boundaries. Once a boundary violation has happened and has been identified, assuming all parties wish to resume working, Benjamin and Sohnen-Moe offer that a follow-up conversation is the next step. This conversation aims to re-establish the boundary agreement and identify the cause of the boundary violation to find a solution. Using this new information, the parties can address the obstacle either by further clarifying the agreement or adjusting the agreement so that the obstacle is no longer an issue. Identifying the obstacles as a part of relationship repair goes one step beyond simply apologizing and moving on. It provides an opportunity to cultivate trust and build preventative measures so that the violation does not happen again.

I have found this follow-up structure to be particularly helpful in my work as an intimacy director. I offer an example of how this follow-up process was used successfully during a scene where I was the intimacy director. Within the context of the scene, the two actors with whom I was working agreed to engage in a lift. Actor A was to jump into the arms of Actor B. Actor A would wrap their legs around Actor B's waist, and they would kiss. During the boundary agreement, Actor A declared a boundary, stating that they did not want Actor B to contact their rear. Knowing that the scene involved a jump, Actor B identified an obstacle. They were worried that it would be difficult for them to maintain stable support for Actor A without grabbing the rear. The three of us agreed that it would be possible to support the lifted actor if Actor B were to hold onto Actor A's thighs for support instead of their rear. Actor A would then wrap their arms around Actor B's shoulders for added stability. Both parties agreed that they willing to try and

felt confident attempting that plan. We solidified the initial boundary agreement by repeating what had been decided.

While the first few attempts at this choreography were successful, in one run of the scene, Actor B missed their mark and accidentally grabbed the side of Actor A's rear. Since we had established that the run should pause if a boundary was crossed, Actor A called for a hold, and we addressed the boundary immediately. Actor B quickly apologized and expressed eagerness to find a new solution. Together, we looked for the obstacle. This helped to reaffirm that Actor B's actions were not done maliciously and allowed both actors to be active collaborators in finding a solution that supported their best work.

In this situation, the obstacle was identified: it was too difficult for the actor doing the catching to know where their hands were going to land until it was too late. They needed more range of motion to maintain support and balance. The choreography was deemed too risky to continue. We needed to either adjust the agreement (meaning that Actor A may have said, "actually, it's ok if you grab me on the rear in this area, as long as it meets these qualifications") or adjust the choreography. It would be inappropriate at this point to move forward with no adjustment and just hope it didn't happen again. Additionally, the offer to adjust the boundary can only come from the person with the boundary. Pressuring someone to change their boundary for the purpose of a scene is coercion and would result in unethical production of a scene of intimacy.

We first investigated options involving adjusting the choreography. One option would have been to adjust the type of catch. For instance, instead of one actor wrapping their legs around the other actor, Actor B could catch Actor A in a cradle position. This would have eliminated the risk of grabbing the rear. However, we decided that this did not produce the

desired story and did not support the piece's contextual moment. The job of the intimacy professional is to create a plethora of choreographic alternatives that support the context of the story and allow the actors to maintain their boundaries.

In this situation, Actor A chose to offer an adjustment to the boundary – and altered the original boundary agreement. They made a specification that their boundary was not a “no” for all contact on the rear, but a “no” for *open hand* contact on the rear. With this clarification, the two actors agreed to try the same style of jump, but Actor B would use their forearms to create a basket under Actor A’s rear. For added security, Actor B would also clench their hands into fists to avoid open-handed contact. They agreed to try it, and both parties felt confident moving forward with that arrangement. If the boundary agreement is modified, all parties should still be able to repeat the new boundaries. In this case, the obstacle was addressed, and the agreement was adjusted. Where before the boundary had been “no contact on the rear,” it was now adjusted to “no open hand contact on the rear.” Both parties reaffirmed the agreement, noted the consequences for violating the boundary, and moved forward, building the relationship on mutual respect and trust.

Communication such as this is preventative for the need for extensive reporting. As the agreement becomes more refined, the actors can continue offering positive reinforcement and informing each other when things go well, a process that is just as important as informing someone when something goes wrong.

As defined in Benjamin and Sohnen-Moe’s “Assertion Sequence,” the third and fourth conversations come into play if and only if these follow-up conversations prove to be ineffective and the boundary becomes repeatedly violated. This is usually due to one of the parties not listening to their scene partner and may sometimes be maliciously motivated. This third

conversation is known as the “Confrontation,” in which one party explicitly addresses the negative consequences of the boundary violation on them and their work. This is a particularly difficult conversation and can be supported greatly by the advocacy of an intimacy director.

Benjamin and Sohnen-Moe offer the three-part sentence: “Behavior + Feelings + Effect.”¹⁵⁷ In practice, this sentence can sound like: “When your hand grabs higher on my thigh than we agreed, I feel frustrated because it takes me out of the scene and stops me from being able to do my best work.” The effects of crossed boundaries are real and tangible and affect artists' ability to fully engage in their job. When someone continues to cross declared boundaries, they affect much more than the actor's feeling of safety at that moment. The negative impacts of this could ripple to their stability financially, physically, and emotionally, especially if it results in job termination. This three-part sentence can be repeated in several different ways until the parties recommit to the original agreement, or the agreement is changed to adjust for newly discovered obstacles.

Should the confrontation meeting prove ineffective, the final action is to terminate the relationship. Termination is more easily justified to an administration after going through the full assertive sequence as it demonstrates a documented approach to working through the given problems. If someone cannot work collaboratively, ethically, and safely, they may need to be removed from the production. The boundary agreement is maintained or adjusted until it both serves the story and serves the needs of the actors portraying this. In all of these conversations, respect and empathy are essential, but it should center on the experience of the person whose boundaries are being violated. The Assertion Sequence offers actionable steps for boundary

¹⁵⁷ Sohnen-Moe and Benjamin.

maintenance that allow for exploration, knowing that there are systems of accountability for the safety of all those within the process.

This type of extensive communication training is not the norm among creatives and not an ingrained part of most actor training programs. Many times, actors avoid identifying the moment when a boundary is crossed because it may not have ultimately been as bad as they thought, but it is perceived to be more uncomfortable to engage in a situation where their scene partner could react defensively. However, when these oversteps are not immediately addressed, they have the chance to build up over time, which could culminate in a much larger display of frustration coming seemingly “out of the blue” to the other actor. Discussing boundaries creates opportunities to build trust and prevents the escalation of situations. The role of the intimacy director acts as a facilitator for these uncomfortable conversations, offering strategies such as the ones outlined above so that the ensemble can fully consent to how they want to work together. Trust building communication relies on addressing missteps when they happen in a way that is assertive and honoring the commitment that both parties have made to work within the given boundaries.

The Discomfort Scale: Differentiating Between Uncomfortable and Unsafe

The language that is utilized in a room can greatly affect the safety of those who are working. As an intimacy director, I have received pushback from professionals who are worried that too much conversation surrounding boundaries will dilute the efficacy of the actor. They often follow a theoretical acting approach that believes the actor must experience what the character experiences, especially psychologically. In reaction to this, many people who are

looking to support actor agency default to language that assures the actor that they want them to be comfortable.

The term comfortable has received a bad reputation from many acting theorists and practitioners who advocate that discomfort is the only way to grow. While I agree that discomfort is necessary for growth, I have seen those who fear comfort use this argument to validate unsafe practices that promote actor trauma and emotional pain. Often this comes about due to improper emotional and physical support when using dangerous psychological or therapeutic acting techniques. Either way, both extremes harm artistic growth and diminish the actor's ability to effectively communicate a story to the audience.

I was first introduced to the idea of differentiating uncomfortable and unsafe from Tonia Sina during Intimacy Directors International's 9-day Intimacy Choreographers Intensive at Urbana Champaign in 2018. Using this as a framework, my colleagues Zev Steinrock, a professor of movement and certified intimacy director with IDI and now IDC, and Terri Ciafalo, the Production Manager and Professor of Stage Management at the University of Illinois and I detailed how this scale could be used to identify discomfort as a process for achieving artistic growth. As an independent teaching artist, I have continued to refine and adapt this scale and teach it as a concrete tool for instructors to engage in a dialogue with their students, calling it "The Discomfort Scale."

The discomfort scale offers a parallel between artistic growth and physical growth. The discomfort scale details a spectrum that begins, on one end, with comfort and transitions through discomfort to pain and eventually trauma or injury. When depicting the scale, these markings are not equidistant. It is also a highly personal scale that will look slightly different for each

practitioner. In this section, I offer a general shape for this scale as a tool for inviting self-reflection and analysis regarding discomfort, growth, and the tools for communicating each.

Generally speaking, the distance from comfort to discomfort is relatively small. As someone who does not enjoy most physical exercise, this is a phenomenon that I experience regularly. The moment I am asked to hold a plank position, I am uncomfortable. Discomfort appears almost immediately; however, I am likely not in pain despite the discomfort that I am undoubtedly experiencing in my arms, core, and legs. My brain may immediately begin to fire off excuses and reasons to drop down to my knees, but I can last for a while before I begin to shake and am forced to end the exercise. Discomfort is an essential part of expanding physical ability and stamina. One cannot train to run a marathon while sitting on the couch and eating Doritos. Discomfort is critical to the human ability to grow muscle and gain physical resilience.

However, were someone to engage in physical exercises that were too advanced or to push themselves too far, they may identify a moment of pain, where their body signals that proceeding with this activity is a bad idea. Pain can come in several forms, and not all pain is experienced equally. While investigating pain response in circus performers, authors James Wellington and Daniel Nogueira argue that the brain considers the context of the situation to determine the type of pain response. Using the example of shoulder pain, they argue that “The brain has to make a judgment call about just how dangerous this is (as shoulder pain may have occurred when training in the past). The brain makes fast calculations based on historical events and context.”¹⁵⁸ In this case, pain is used to inform the circus performer if they are in danger of injury. Circus performers expect a certain amount of pain simply due to how they engage and

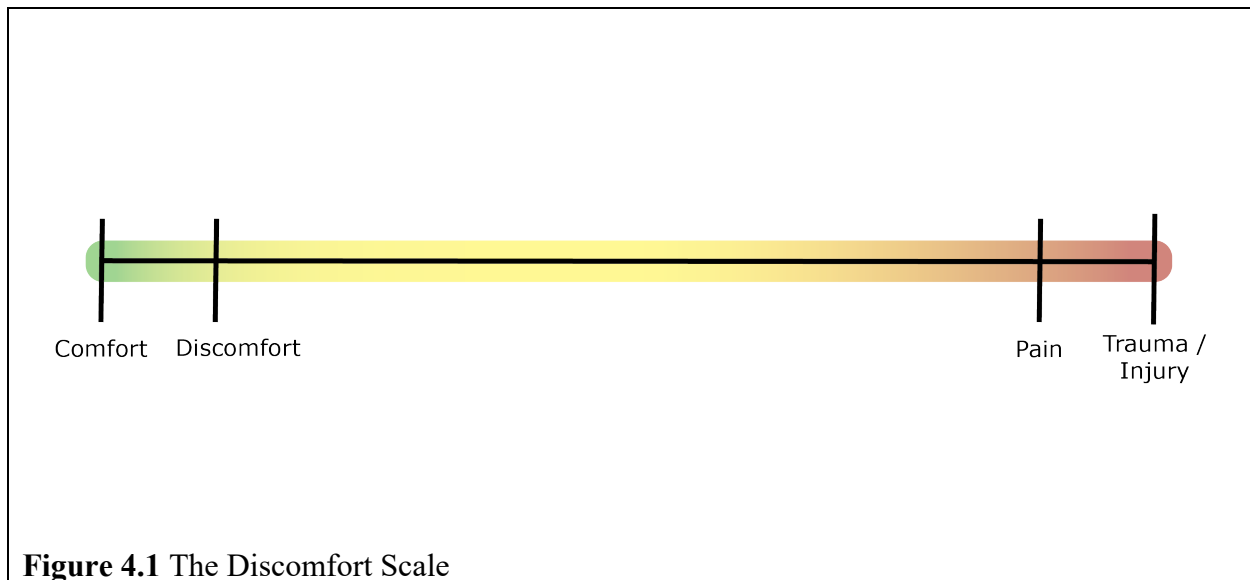
¹⁵⁸ Wellington and Nogueira, “Pain Response in Circus Artists.”

learn a vocabulary for how to quantify it. By wrapping the body around a metal trapeze pole, there will likely be bruising and some pain, but this may not necessarily mean injury. Circus artists engage in a number of conditioning exercises meant to build up their pain tolerance to certain activities that are extremely uncomfortable but likely will not cause a lasting injury. However, other pain responses are exceptionally important as they tell the body to stop before an injury can occur. Healthy pain tolerance varies depending on the physical level of the performer.

Similarly, Actors may experience emotional discomfort very quickly during an intimate scene. It is uncomfortable to pretend to be in love with someone with whom they are not actually in love. However, this may not necessarily equate to emotional pain. By distinguishing the pain signal from the discomfort signal, actors are encouraged to stay in the work, even though it may be uncomfortable. It is important to acknowledge that the goal is never pain. Pain is a signal to the body that there is danger. It is the threshold between uncomfortable and unsafe. Pain is not necessarily unhealthy but should not be the goal of work.

When visualizing the discomfort scale, I create a rough diagram of the spectrum between comfort, discomfort, pain, and injury. The scale is personal to each individual, but this depiction acts as a touchstone for further discussions. As shown in figure 4.1, the distance between comfort and discomfort is quite small, but there is a great deal of room between discomfort and pain. This illustrates the great lengths of time in which someone can be uncomfortable before they are unsafe.

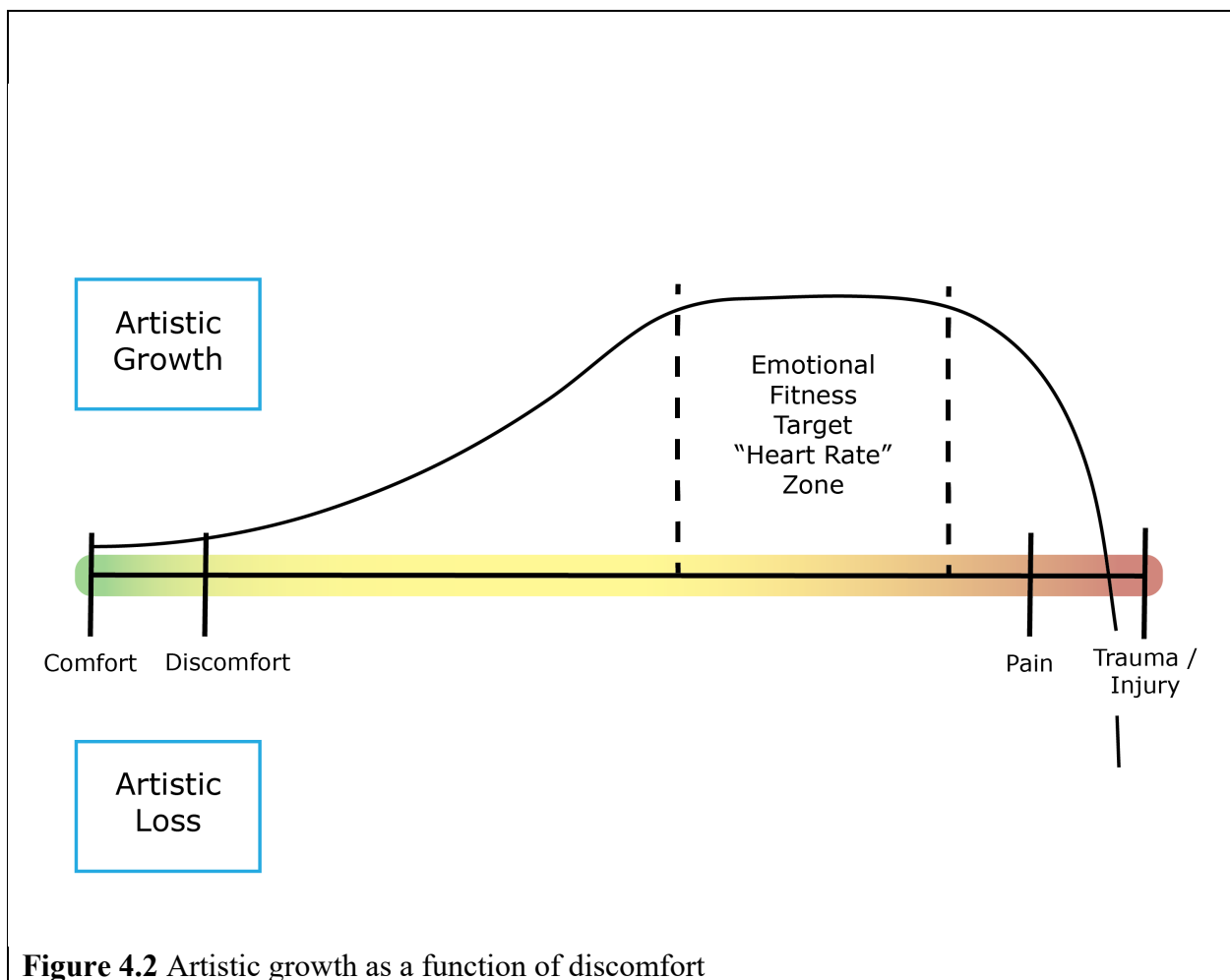
Just like physical fitness, emotional fitness, and resilience can be built over time. Additionally, there will be some years that an actor is more physically or emotionally fit than



other years. We see a cultural narrative that encourages actors to get into better physical shape before tackling highly physical roles, such as Peter Pan, but there is a distinct lack in the narrative regarding preparing emotionally for a role. Building emotional fitness takes time and intentionality, just like physical fitness. Additionally, there are areas on the discomfort scale that maximize artistic growth. In general, simply crossing the line from comfort into discomfort does not necessarily equate to artistic growth. Sustained discomfort leads to growth. To add to the visualization of the discomfort scale, I have added a Y-axis to the scale that demonstrates artistic growth (see figure 4.2). The line, in grey, indicates the rate of emotional growth as a function of discomfort. There is a clear point at which the line plateaus. I have dubbed this area as the “Emotional Fitness Target ‘Heart Rate’ Zone.”

When building cardiovascular endurance, most heart rate monitors will let the wearer know when they have reached their target heart rate. This zone indicates maximum fitness achievement, and it has an upper barrier and a lower barrier. If the heart rate dips too low, it will not yield growth results. If the heart rate is increased past the upper barrier, this will also yield poor results and may be dangerous. Beyond this, there is a steep decline in artistic growth after

pain, and the grey artistic growth line enters into artistic loss by the time it reaches the trauma/injury mark. In physical work, injuries have the potential to put the athlete back weeks in their training. After sustaining an injury, they will need to take time off to heal, and when they return, they will likely have lost many of the gains they made during training. Emotionally, this is the same. If an actor oversteps their pain indicators and enters into a space of emotional injury or trauma, they are likely to go backward in their training and have less resilience to emotional discomfort.



Thinking about discomfort as a scale allows for a more nuanced dialogue about actor growth and advancement. Learning a new language for boundaries and consent is uncomfortable

but not unsafe. Diving too deeply into a character's emotional life that closely mirrors one's unhealed trauma can be unsafe, not just uncomfortable.

When working with actors, I try not to use the term uncomfortable unless I am actually concerned about their comfort. An analysis of discomfort is particularly useful when rehearsing intimate scenes that ask for unnatural postures or sustained kneeling. In these instances, the discomfort is not in service of the story, so I do my best to eliminate it. However, when I ask actors how they're feeling about a challenging scene or if they'd consent to a specific piece of choreography, I often substitute the word "confidence" for "comfortable. I ask, "would that make you feel more confident," rather than "would that make you feel more comfortable." It is possible to be confident, even in discomfort.

Particularly in my work in academia, I have used this scale to encourage students to be active collaborators in their learning. At the end of a lesson, I ask them to self-analyze by pointing to where they were on the scale for most of the class. If they feel they were in their "target heart rate zone," I ask that they investigate what helped them achieve this state. If they are below their zone, I ask them to think about what they could do next time to encourage more discomfort if they wish to be in that zone. If they are above their zone, they could prepare tools for next time that will allow them to be more sustainable in their discipline. As an educator, this allows me to also engage in the dialogue and offer tools to push students further or help them manage the current learning objectives.

Finally, just like physical fitness, emotional fitness takes a great deal of intentionality and energy. Actors must engage in cool down practices, mindfulness practices, get enough sleep, and eat well to fuel their emotional work. Proper care of the self can support growth, and if this is missing, it may make it easier for someone to push past the pain and into injury.

Many professionals with whom I have worked in the past few years have been cautious about the position of the intimacy director due to their fear that the position devalues discomfort as a tool for artmaking. I argue by analyzing communication strategies more closely; intimacy direction can help to create a vocabulary of discomfort that prioritizes artistic growth without glorifying pain as the ideal outcome. Simply substituting confident for comfortable can dramatically impact the actor's ability to navigate safe and sustainable artmaking.

Acknowledging Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility through Communication

Effective communication can empower artists. It is the responsibility of the intimacy professional to be educated with regards to the types of rooms and stories in which they are working and recognize that communication is nuanced and influenced by the identities of those who are working in the space. This can involve utilizing the correct pronouns for all of the actors, addressing the anatomy of the characters, and not necessarily the anatomy of the actors involved (unless, of course, specific barriers or modesty garments are needed), and maintaining a high level of cultural competency to prevent micro and macro aggressions.

Care work for the performance of intimacy can be understood through a lens of intersectionality. As Patricia Hill Collins writes in her book *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, “intersectional paradigms view race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and age among others as mutually constructing systems of power. Because these systems permeate all social relations, untangling their effects in any given situation for any given population remains difficult.”¹⁵⁹ Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) have

¹⁵⁹ Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*.

had more and different types of policing on their bodies, communication strategies, and sexualities than white people. Black sexualities have often been mobilized as tools to uphold slavery, Jim Crow segregation, racial separation, and ghettoization.¹⁶⁰ Black women, in particular, are at a higher risk for being victims of sexual violence, particularly at the hand of white men, and have historically been hyper-sexualized as a vessel for sexual desire. This narrative has been used to justify “enslavement, rape, forced reproduction, and other forms of sexual coercion in the early onset of Western colonization.”¹⁶¹ Additionally, BIPOC individuals are at a higher risk than their white counterparts of being penalized for their communication strategies, regardless of what communication strategy they use. While Benjamin and Sohnen-Moe offer that termination is the final step of the Assertion Sequence, it cannot be ignored that should a BIPOC artist choose to terminate an unhealthy artistic relationship, it may be significantly more difficult for them to find another job than their white counterpart, according to a study done by Actors Equity Association.¹⁶²

There is a tremendous amount of social and cultural trauma that has been folded into sexuality politics. It shapes the way viewers understand sexuality, adds to the burden of what it means for performers to perform sexuality on-screen, and directly impacts an intimacy director’s ability to effectively communicate. When looking at the risk for sexual assault, women (especially Black women and Women of Color) are much more likely to be victims—because of

¹⁶⁰ Collins.

¹⁶¹ Collins.

¹⁶² Actors Equity Association, “Actors’ Equity Releases First-Ever Diversity Study Showing Disparities in Hiring in the Theatre Industry.”

this, asking a white cis man to perform sexuality comes with a different set of implications and vulnerabilities than asking a black trans woman to perform the same-sex act.

This is not to say that one demographic needs care while the other does not, but intersectionality influences our understanding and imagining of the type of care work that may be required for these types of scenes and who can provide that care work. If not consciously, all actors are affected by this cultural understanding of sexuality in one way or another, which is why it is considered when thinking about the role of the intimacy director/coordinator as someone who administers care.

Those performing care work in the capacity of an intimacy professional must be culturally competent. Specifically, they must be aware of the intricate dynamics of how race and gender affect communication strategies. When looking at the diverse lived experiences of those who wish to participate in this care work, we cannot imagine a standard process for intimacy direction/coordination that will work the same for everyone (or even that all intimacy directors/coordinators need the same types of training). Each intimacy coordinator or intimacy director will have lived and learned experience that may be more suited or less suited to a particular job or working environment. Intimacy director and coordinator Teniece Divya Johnson speaks to this during an interview with Elle Magazine regarding their experience as a Black intimacy coordinator:

“Another part of this work is asking people that do have the privilege to look at it. Should you be in that room? Are you the best coordinator for this job? We're in an industry that is based in entertainment and intertwined with ego. We all have a lot of work to do here. Just because you're good at coordinating themes or choreographing action-reaction dialogue doesn't mean you're a student of anti-racism. Not to fault individuals in any situation, but I think everything happened really fast. We're [now] holding these industry leaders accountable. We're like, you don't represent all people. Of course, they don't. But I think if we say, my goals are staying connected and invested in my community and building

relationships so that we can help one another, what does that look like?
Accountability.”¹⁶³

Intimacy professionals benefit from self-awareness to be present for the care work required to produce scenes of intimacy. Part of this emerging new ethical code will be a question of when to take a job and when to say no. This question is specially targeted towards white professionals, and more so white women, who have historically been viewed as a neutral caretaking body by the dominant culture. Intimacy direction has an opportunity to fight against centering whiteness as normative and considering cultural competency. Anti-Racism is a core value of intimacy direction as it affects all five of the pillars of intimacy direction, and it will greatly impact the safety of spaces in which diverse artists can come together to collaborate. Intimacy direction is rooted in the safety of all bodies, and an ever-evolving toolkit for communication remains at the heart of effective working.

Intimacy Direction and Trauma Stewardship

Many are drawn to the work of intimacy direction due to its capacity to create cultural change and reduce harm. When acting in the capacity of intimacy director/coordinator, I am often able to create a safe place where the actor feels empowered to discuss their history of trauma and negative experiences they may have undergone in previous projects. This urge from actors can come from a history of being gaslit and invalidated in other workspaces. However, this can inadvertently create an environment in which performers and crew members externalize their stories of workplace trauma to the detriment of their collaborators and even the intimacy

¹⁶³ Candice Frederick, “Why Hollywood Needs More Black Intimacy Coordinators.”

director. I have yet to walk into a set, workshop, or theatre in which I was not almost immediately bombarded with stories of actors or crew members being abused, harassed, or mistreated during the production of intimacy.

Most of the time, these stories are shared in a way that is attempting to validate my work or the role of the intimacy director. Some use it as a type of therapy or processing, and still, others use it as a method to show that this is how the industry is, and it would be pointless to try and change it. For better or worse, it seems that the intimacy coordinator/director's role has become a beacon for trauma sharing, and this requires attention and care. In her work, *Trauma Stewardship*, Laura van Dernoot Lipsky offers an acknowledgment of the secondhand trauma often experienced by those who offer care.¹⁶⁴ She encourages a practice to stabilize the caregiver so that they may act as a trauma steward without loss of personhood. As a beacon for trauma, it can become easy for the caregiver to only see the trauma and not the times when things went well. This can create care work from a place of fear, rather than the adaptable and present care work needed by the recipient.

Lipsky also cites that organizational tendencies can contribute to how trauma is stored and how the care worker can effectively steward that trauma. She calls for a deeper investigation of the workspace, how it looks, and how they empower the care worker to do their job. In the early phases of intimacy coordination/direction, we are often a department of one. I have often shown up to set or rehearsal without anyone knowing who I am or how I function. It is then incumbent upon me to instruct others on how to interact with me and inform them how I operate and how I do not operate. I am battling misconceptions of the work while simultaneously trying

¹⁶⁴ Lipsky and Burk, *Trauma Stewardship*.

to correct and effectively perform the work. Without organizational support, this impacts the quality of the care work that one can provide.

Many intimacy coordinators/directors are called to this work because they have experienced trauma or abuse in the past, and this is an opportunity to make sure that it doesn't happen again. However, when constantly interacting with vulnerable and risky situations, it is imperative that the intimacy professional also take part in their care work, lest they be retriggered or allow their trauma to inform the work in unhelpful ways. For Intimacy directors of color, the stakes magnify as they are also often attempting to navigate aggressions and microaggressions to foster a healthy and creative environment for all. Lipsky advocates for mindfulness and presence because it is so easy to get caught up in all that is wrong and bad about this industry, see abuse and harassment on every corner, and be burned by the work with a great capacity to do good in the industry.

Communication is a messy and complex area of study and naming it as a pillar of intimacy direction may seem fairly intuitive. However, the naming of communication as a pillar of intimacy invites practitioners to examine how they communicate and their assumptions about what effective and collaborative communication looks like. The learned industry culture of the entertainment industries has created an environment in which communication cannot and does not happen effectively, causing mistakes, harm, and in some cases, abuse.

The intimacy director and the intimacy coordinator's role is to facilitate communication between all departments of production for safe and ethical scenes of intimacy. In creating a new role for the theatre industry, there is an opportunity to shed old standards of communication and begin to practice compassion, listening, cultural competency, and trust-building.

In this chapter, I have worked to re-define defined boundary maintenance as a collaborative approach to building trust between two people, not simply a method for protecting oneself. This collaborative framework reminds practitioners that, as in all parts of the theatre, scenes of intimacy require trust and teamwork. The intimacy director has the opportunity to provide a specialized approach to work that is highly stigmatized and vulnerable and communicate that work professionally. It invites all to work through uncomfortable conversations for the sake of personal and artistic growth and does not sacrifice integrity or boundaries for the sake of comfort.

Effective communication is key to avoiding mistakes, blurred boundaries, and violations during work. It is a combination of boundary declarations, maintenance, and conflict resolution that allows the intimacy professional to act as a conduit in the space, helping to translate the words of the ensemble into actionable notes for a more fruitful collaboration.

CHAPTER 5: CONTEXT AND CHOREOGRAPHY

When first creating the “Pillars of Intimacy Direction,” original collaborators Tonia Sina, Alicia Rodis, and Siobhan Richardson saw context as so intuitive to the process of intimacy direction that they almost overlooked adding it as a distinct pillar. Context is a key part of every job in the arts. It is the understanding of what story we are trying to tell why we are trying to tell it, and how telling it will affect our world. Alternatively, choreography has always been seen as one of the new and exciting core concepts to the practice of intimacy direction. The idea that all intimacy should be choreographed was (and in many ways still is) seen as revolutionary to those who viewed that intimacy should be organic and unplanned. The movement for intimacy direction took the stance early on that scenes of intimacy should be choreographed, much like a dance or fight sequences, for the safety of the actors and crew members. There are examples of both context and choreography throughout the other chapters of this dissertation, as all of the pillars are linked; however, I have chosen to combine my analysis of context and choreography, not because the two are interchangeable, but because they are so deeply intertwined that the discussion of one greatly informs the discussion of the other.

Context as a stand-alone pillar creates an opportunity to reimagine the idea of “professional best practices.” There will never be a singular set of best practices for choreographing intimacy, as the work recognizes each production's unique circumstances as well as the intersectional identities of those who perform it and those who choreograph it. The pillar of context can be seen throughout all of these chapters, as it affects how consent is given and received, what types of closure are necessary, and whether or not certain communication strategies will be effective. By including a distinctive analysis of context in this chapter, I

advocate for a more nuanced approach to intimacy direction as a discipline. Intimacy choreography cannot assume a neutral body and is most successful when it remains flexible and impermanent to meet the needs of each individual and production.

This chapter specifically uses context as a framework for creating sustainable and repeatable choreography for effective and ethical storytelling. I argue against the idea that choreography can only produce rigid storytelling and instead assert that choreography can be used as a fluid and dynamic strategy for consensual working. Using examples from my work in professional and academic theatre, tv, and film, I will examine how sexual dramaturgy and external social, political, and legal factors, affect choreographic choices. Additionally, I offer tools to navigate these choreographic choices. Finally, I will explore questions of directorial ethics surrounding the staging of intimate scenes and the impact that they have on both those who perform them and those who watch them.

Sexual Dramaturgy: Setting the Stage for Effective Choreography

When exploring options for intimacy choreography, and before implementing any choreographic methodology, all parties must first understand the story they are trying to tell. I have been to rehearsals where the director and actors have talked for extensive amounts of time about why the character is holding (for instance) the rose instead of the lily – what’s the significance, what do we want the audience to feel, how does this deeply change the actor? Etc. In the same rehearsal, they have glossed over the intimate scene with nothing more than raised eyebrows and giggles – perhaps a joke or two about how the actors had better “get comfortable with one another fast!” Stories of intimacy are often some of the most climactic moments in a

show where the characters are forever changed. The group's understanding of the piece's context is critical to effectively choreograph and perform a scene of intimacy.

The directorial vision of the piece leads the discussion of the context and is then enhanced through the lens of a specialist and the actors' inputs. An intimacy director understands and uses the directorial vision to support the discovery of choreography during the rehearsal period. The intimacy director supports the directorial vision and cannot work effectively if this is not clearly communicated or if they are in disagreement with the director. The directorial vision can be expressed in various ways: through the tone of the intimacy, the pace of the intimacy, or the positioning that the director is hoping to see. I have worked with some directors who have a very clear vision regarding the type of intimacy they wish to see, while others can offer a more general tone and are interested in the exploration of the ensemble when deciding on exact blocking. Both types of directorial vision can be extremely successful as long as the piece's overall vision is understood and agreed to by all.

While it may seem fundamental that all collaborators would understand the directorial vision, shame often clouds the ensemble's ability to fully understand the vision for the intimacy. In some cases, the room is comfortable discussing why the intimacy happens but may balk at describing the sex acts themselves. This leads to a culture of silence, where artists feel a need to censor themselves while reading graphic stage directions or make a joke about fumbling around the other person's body. Jokes like these diffuse discomfort by pushing off the conversations about what will specifically be shown and can create coercive situations in which actors do not have informed consent from the beginning of the work period. As discussed in the previous chapter, the work of the intimacy director is to provide language and hold space for these conversations so that all parties understand the context of the piece and have the opportunity to

provide their informed consent. If there is discomfort in the space, the intimacy director can model how to effectively communicate through that discomfort and offer positioning and specifics without the need for personal disclosure. This discussion creates space for nuanced dialogue about the physical storytelling choices and invites actors and directors to contribute through a character-driven lens.

Context also considers the individual, and how their body and life experiences integrate with larger cultural and systemic power structures. The gender and race of individual actors will greatly affect the context of the piece and how the intimacy direction should be handled. Intimacy manifests differently on each body, and when thinking in universal tropes of intimacy, there will likely be overlooked nuance that could have supported the storytelling of that moment. Patricia Hill Collins, in her book *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, writes that “Sexuality is not simply a biological function; rather, it is a system of ideas and social practices that is deeply implicated in shaping American social inequalities.”¹⁶⁵ Often performers are placed in the position of knowingly and unknowingly reinforcing certain systems of power, a burden that can be very heavy, particularly for Black performers. This is incorporated into the understanding of the types of care that may need to be administered during the production of scenes of intimacy. Additionally, it will inform how the audience will perceive certain choreographic choices. By acknowledging the context of the choreography, actors can fully consent to the story that they tell.

The intimacy professional must also identify their cultural lens and personal bias and work with the cast and creative team to understand how this story of intimacy manifests

¹⁶⁵ Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*.

specifically for these characters being played by these actors. It is easy to make assumptions about how human intimacy looks due to a fairly homogenous representation of intimacy in mainstream media. Still, the intimacy director challenges this assumption by offering the nuanced lens of a specialist who has studied intimate storytelling across numerous mediums (i.e., sexual dramaturgy). Intimacy direction can challenge assumptions to make a more powerful statement about these characters specifically.

This type of culturally conscious working can offer support and protection to other creative team members as well. I have witnessed multiple times when members of the production team are asked to bring their sexual history into the discussion of the work due to a lack of sexual dramaturgy. This often happens when the story is about a demographic not represented by the actors or the director. Although this is a practice that is becoming more and more frowned upon, it is still a part of the learned industry culture of contemporary entertainment. While working on a production in 2019, I watched as the director turned to a lighting technician to ask them how they had sex with their same-sex partner. This type of behavior is a form of sexual harassment and placed the technician on the spot to reveal highly personal details that had no relevance to the job they were hired to do.

Additionally, this line of questioning assumes that all same-sex partners engage in sexual intimacy in the same ways. It disregards the nuance of the characters in the script and stereotypes the intimacy. In my capacity as intimacy coordinator, I was able to divert the discussion back to the relevant questions at hand and offered my research to the conversation in a way that did not reflect poorly on the lighting technician (I also followed up with them, the director, and with the appropriate reporting pathways). No one should be asked to disclose information about their personal sex lives for the production.

Intimacy direction requires an understanding of sexual dramaturgy and holds a responsibility to represent those stories authentically and provide the information necessary for the creative team to do so. It is not the actors' responsibility to bring their sexual history to the table, though they may bring their research and ideas.

In some cases, the creative team's disclosure can be a collaborative and healthy part of the work. However, if this is desired, then extra care must be taken so that the creative team consents to hear the information disclosed and that there are resources available to support adequate closure and boundary maintenance. Personal disclosure cannot remain the norm as it is now, nor should it be expected as a part of the actor's job. As a recommendation, the intimacy coordinator or the intimacy director should also refrain from disclosing personal information instead of offering dramaturgical support to the creative team in service of the vision and aesthetic.¹⁶⁶ This helps to create professional boundaries between the intimacy professional and the production. Without these boundaries, it can appear as though the intimacy professional is choreographing their fantasies or experiences. Additionally, this may be a form of sexual harassment and can

¹⁶⁶ When offering support for sexual dramaturgy, consent must be received before showing explicit images or materials to the cast and crew. It is *never* appropriate to show graphic sexual material to actors or the crew without their consent, and the viewing of sexually graphic materials should not be required during a production. This also applies to classroom work in which students may be asked to explore intimacy. This extends to any external images including animal mating practices. This too requires consent ahead of the viewing and must not be mandatory for either classroom or production settings.

endanger the entire production team. The final choreography should remain rooted in the characters and the story.

Context Beyond Scene Work

As a movement specialist, the intimacy director contributes artistically to the piece and promotes safety, consent, and clear communication. They are a member of the design team and should be included in production meetings, receive rehearsal reports, and be present for tech rehearsals. Clear communication and understanding of the design of the piece helps the intimacy director research more effectively and allows them to navigate consent more effectively as they have more information for the actors. Costuming, lighting, sound, and set design all impact the choreographic choices available to the intimacy director. For example, during the Broadway production of *Slave Play*, the entire back of the theatre was covered in mirrors so that the audience can watch the show and watch *other* audience members watch the show.¹⁶⁷ This was a change in set design from the play's first production at Yale University (where I was lucky enough to assist Alicia Rodis for a few days during the initial intimacy choreography for the piece) in which the audience sat on either side of the stage, creating the effect of watching the show and also being watched by the other audience members. The creative team did not want to lose this effect and used mirrors to create a similar effect for a proscenium Broadway stage.

For an intimacy director, the knowledge that mirrors would be used early on affects the types of masking techniques available for choreographing simulated sex acts and may impact the

¹⁶⁷ Ferri, "Slave Play Tony Award Winner Clint Ramos Reveals How Sex and Race Inspired the Famed Mirror Wall Set."

type of actions that the actors consent to perform. Heightened exposure can increase actor vulnerability. By working proactively and collaboratively to gain the full scope of the design context, intimacy directors can provide options, justifications, and insight so that actors have time to voice their concerns and offer their enthusiastic and informed consent to serve the story. All of these design choices are meant to enhance a specific vision, and when the production team and the actors are all in agreement with that vision, it fosters a community where the intimacy is in service of something larger.

As a specialist, the intimacy director is attentive to the piece's cultural and legal context and how the audience will view the production's design and vision. The intimacy director incorporates an awareness of both state and federal laws and regulations surrounding nudity and simulated sex.¹⁶⁸ The intimacy design should reflect the director's vision with the context of the location and community in mind. This is particularly important for those invited to be guest artists in a community that is not their own. The intimacy director should research the local traditions and attitudes that may be relevant to the perception of the story or the choreograph.

Additionally, recent events, such as school shootings, environmental plights, and presidential elections (among others), will affect the ensemble's safety when working on specific topics. Regardless of local events, intimacy directors should use content warnings regularly before working on potentially triggering visual or audio storytelling. For example, a content warning should be used before rehearsing the vocals of a sexual assault scene (even if there is no

¹⁶⁸ Often, these laws intersect with the laws that govern venues such as strip clubs, or adult film distribution. For instance, here may be legal regulations that prevent the selling of alcohol during a show that contains nudity. This will affect what choreographic options are available.

physical simulation) so that members of the team may use the tools they need to use for their safety. The intimacy director may also wish to add additional breaks beyond the equity minimum for self-care and sustainability. Awareness of potentially triggering stimuli can help create an environment in which people feel supported and express what they need to do their best work.

Having a grounded understanding of context, not just of the story, but of the situation surrounding the scene of intimacy requires that the intimacy director challenge their world view to find empathy first as a tool for collaborative theatre-making. In many other choreographic disciplines, performers are often asked to “put on” choreography that has been designed by someone else. Stories of intimacy are extremely nuanced and troubled in our society. I argue that intimacy direction cannot ethically embrace pre-choreographed intimacy as this assumes that all bodies are the same.¹⁶⁹ With the development of this new specialization, we have an opportunity to de-center the idea of a neutral actor and develop techniques and methods that are as adaptable and nuanced as the people who use them. Context provides depth to the work of intimacy direction. As this work develops, there may be “how to choreograph a kiss” guides or “how to stage simulated sex” guides that focus on the mechanics of a particular masking technique without responding to the complexities of individual bodies, shapes, flexibilities, identities,

¹⁶⁹ Some productions have set choreography (this happens particularly in the case of opera).

Intimacy direction understands that not all bodies are the same, and each comes with their own set of boundaries. This is challenged in practice due to copyright issues, and reproductions of a staged performance. Intimacy directors such as Tonia Sina, Adam Noble, and Doug Scholz-Carlson are exploring this work in opera and investigating methods for handling such situations. This is one of the many directions in which research regarding intimacy direction may expand.

mobilities, and cultures. I remain critical of any “how-to” guide that does not consider the cultural context or context of the actors. Practitioners who use a guide such as a shortcut to handling scenes of intimacy risk not only poor storytelling, but they may also cause direct harm to the actors. On this note, I am often asked to offer quick fixes and choreographic tricks from directors looking to stage their own intimacy. These directors generally respond in frustration when my answer is, “it depends.” Context is the first pillar for a reason, as it helps to establish the foundation for everything we do as intimacy directors.

Defining Choreography

Only when the collaborators fully understand the piece's context can choreography be developed effectively and safely. “The Pillars of Intimacy Direction,” as published by Intimacy Directors International, does not explicitly define the word choreography but instead simply state that choreography should happen and offer tools for how to maintain that choreography throughout a production.¹⁷⁰

“Each scene of intimacy must be choreographed, and that choreography will be adhered to for the entire production. Any changes to the choreography must first be approved by the intimacy choreographer. It is the job of stage management to ensure that the choreography is performed as intended. Stage management must

¹⁷⁰ This definition is a helpful starting point, but as this work continues to rapidly develop, I add that if I were to re-write this definition, I would adjust some of the verbiage. In particular, Stage management is not the sole enforcer of intimacy choreography and it is the responsibility of the entire team to build accountability practices so that obstacles can be addressed as necessary throughout the run of a show.

also address any discrepancies that may appear in the rehearsal process and all performances.”¹⁷¹

In my work, I have often received pushback to the idea of choreographing intimacy for fear that it will stifle creative impulses, look rigid or inauthentic, or that it simply is not needed. When speaking about choreography in the context of intimacy work, we first define the term more explicitly. Choreography, as used by intimacy directors, is a roadmap for the physical movements of the scene. It is an adaptable framework that provides containers within which actors can safely and effectively work physically and emotionally with one another.

This definition of intimacy choreography is intentionally broad, as choreography can vary dramatically to fit the actors' needs. For some, they must know exactly where contact will be made, how long, and at what pressure. In these situations, choreography may involve charting out a very specific path across the body, timing it precisely, and working in slow motion until the gestures can be repeated consistently and without error. Choreography such as this may be used in situations where there are extremely rigid boundaries. These boundaries may come from one of the actors and may be imposed by the production needs, such as lighting needs, stunt needs, or audio needs. Intimacy choreography allows for this kind of rigidity but does not demand it. Choreography is the process for building a roadmap to the scene work and assessing the needs of each physical interaction so that the story can be told effectively, and all parties are aware of the necessary boundaries.

Intimacy choreography should, at a minimum, identify the following four characteristics:

- 1) How the intimacy begins
- 2) Physical actions during the intimacy

¹⁷¹ Intimacy Directors International, “The Pillars.”

- 3) Duration and intensity of each action
- 4) How and when the intimacy ends or changes

These elements can be defined rigidly by the ensemble, or they may be estimations during an exploratory phase. However, by talking about each of these elements, actors have an opportunity to assess their consent, identify boundaries, and spot obstacles before engaging in scene work.

Specifically outlining choreographic elements supports not only the actors but the entire production team as well. I ask that stage managers write down the moment of intimacy as though it were fight choreography, allowing actors to have an external reference point if the intimacy director is not present during a rehearsal. Stage managers that I have worked with have come up with incredibly detailed and efficient ways to notate intimacy choreography that highlight the words used within the room, emphasize a sequence of events, and support actors who know that their boundaries are heard and present in every moment of the work. Stage management can also use these elements as landmarks for their notes, especially when they may need to make calls during a moment of intimacy. This increases consistency for them and can help eliminate guesswork.

Containers and Boundaries as Tools for Intimacy Choreography

The word “boundaries” can also spark fear in many artists who have made careers out of listening to, refining, and acting upon their impulses. However, this priority of spontaneity and actor impulses disadvantages actors who have more boundaries than other actors. More often than not, this puts individuals whose identities intersect with multiple systems of oppression at a higher risk. Treating “no boundaries” as the norm implies that anyone who has boundaries is weak or non-collaborative. As I’ve discussed in chapter three, no one has “no boundaries.” The

counterfactual denial of boundaries causes gaslighting and increases opportunities for power abuse. It asks that actors operate as if there are no boundaries and provides no tools for assessing, communicating, and working within the present boundaries, regardless of whether someone speaks about them.

The acknowledgment of boundaries not only increases actor safety, but it can also increase freedom for actors to explore their impulses. A number of my colleagues have created various metaphors to explain this phenomenon. My colleague, Sarah Lozoff, first introduced me to the idea of boundaries as a pool of water – a metaphor which I have found to be particularly useful and have since adapted for my work. I will paraphrase it here. She offers the image of a person who is placed in a large body of water next to a safety boat. There is no end to the water insight, and it is deep enough that the bottom cannot be seen. They are then encouraged to go and explore and see all that there is to be seen! If this person is a strong swimmer, they may swim away from the boat or try and touch the bottom; however, they will likely stop trying if they do not succeed the first few times. The calculation of risk has only one known quantity, the location of the boat. The swimmer is likely afraid of going too deep and being unable to get back to the surface in time, or they may be afraid of swimming too far from the boat. Lozoff then offers a new image. To the swimmer, nothing has changed about what they can see or experience. It is still an expansive body of water, and they cannot see the bottom. However, they are told that about one mile to their right is a cool water feature, and about one mile to their left is a lagoon area, and it is never more than fifteen feet deep. There may also be a treasure on the bottom, but no one is entirely sure. Finally, there is a lifeguard in a helicopter, and if they want out, they just need to wave. With these parameters, it is far more likely that the swimmer will try to touch the

bottom (multiple times), or perhaps they will go explore the water feature, leaving the boat behind.

I hope it is easy to see how this metaphor about swimming can be applied to acting. Without clearly stated boundaries, actors must balance staying close to the metaphorical boat for safety with taking a risk and accidentally swimming too far from the boat (and endangering themselves and their scene partner). By communicating openly and honestly about boundaries, all parties can identify the parameters and can freely explore their impulses within those parameters. When actors do not have to worry about their safety, they are much freer to explore, play, and discover new and exciting moments between the characters.

Research on the benefits of boundaries extends far beyond scenes of intimacy. Landscape architecture has observed this same phenomenon when investigating the characteristics of a playground that encourages children to play. One study, involving thirty African American children and their parents, suggests that children are much more likely to choose playgrounds with fences due to an increased sense of safety.¹⁷² Another simple study cited by the American Society of Landscape Architecture demonstrates that children placed in an unfamiliar environment without a fence stay close to their caretaker. In contrast, when placed in a fenced area, the same children were much more likely to explore beyond the safety of their caretaker.

Boundaries have the opportunity to provide a sense of safety and encourage riskier play. Contemporary discourse in acting often speaks of boundaries not as benign “fences,” but in a fearful way that positions boundaries as if they are, metaphorically, electric fences. When touched, these boundaries will injure both parties (in many cases, the person imagining a

¹⁷² Nasar and Holloman, “Playground Characteristics to Encourage Children to Visit and Play.”

boundary as an electric fence is unjustifiably afraid that they will be wrongly accused of sexual harassment because they hit a boundary). This narrative is damaging to the productive use of boundaries as a tool for choreographing scenes of intimacy. Re-writing the narrative of boundaries as tools for support can enable greater risk-taking and character exploration.

Practically speaking, I use the language of “containers” to create boundaries during a rehearsal process. Originally borrowed Stephen Wangh’s work, *An Acrobat of the Heart*, this language was first introduced to me by Tonia Sina and Alicia Rodis as a tool to help define working areas on the body.¹⁷³ When speaking about a hug, I ask the actors to define the area on their backs within which touch is allowed. In some cases, I ask for them to draw this area with their finger and show, very specifically, where the boundary is. This sets a container. When performing the scene, it becomes easier to tell if someone is inside the container or outside the container.

Clearly defining containers in this way supports actors throughout the run of a show. Without these boundaries, it is difficult to identify how choreography may be changing from night to night. During Profiles Theatre’s production of *Killer Joe* (a production whose significance I expand upon in the introduction), the actor playing Dottie, Claire Wellin, experienced this changing choreography night after night:

“... the scene was arranged so that [Daryl] Cox would only appear to be groping Wellin—his hand was actually around her hips and stomach, over her dress. But as the run went on, she noticed he was moving his hand lower and lower. At first, she couldn’t believe it was happening. But then it got to the point, she says, where he came close to disregarding the choreography and actually touching her between her legs.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷³ Wangh, *An Acrobat of the Heart*.

¹⁷⁴ Levitt and Piatt, “At Profiles Theatre the Drama—and Abuse—Is Real.”

The article details that Wellin felt as though she didn't have the language to speak to the changes each night as they were incremental, and changes are often normalized as a part of live performance when actors are more "in-the-moment." However, detailing specific containers and maintaining boundary agreements can support constructive, non-defensive conversations about night-to-night variances and be integrated as a normal part of boundary maintenance and actor safety. It provides a neutral way to talk about the performance rather than centering it on the actor's comfort or perception of malicious intent. Clearly stated boundaries de-personalize the boundary need and reinforce the agreement made by both parties for best work.

Because intimacy choreography allows the stage management team to record the agreements, should an instance arrive where the choreography is shifting, actors can return to this source for clarity. In some instances, actors may need to go back to the choreography, and slowly work through it to reaffirm the sequence. In other cases, the intimacy director may need to be brought back in to facilitate or make adjustments in light of new obstacles. In either case, having a de-personalized record can support actor agency and prevent instances of both malicious and accidental harm.

Tonia Sina's "Intimacy for the Stage" Methodology

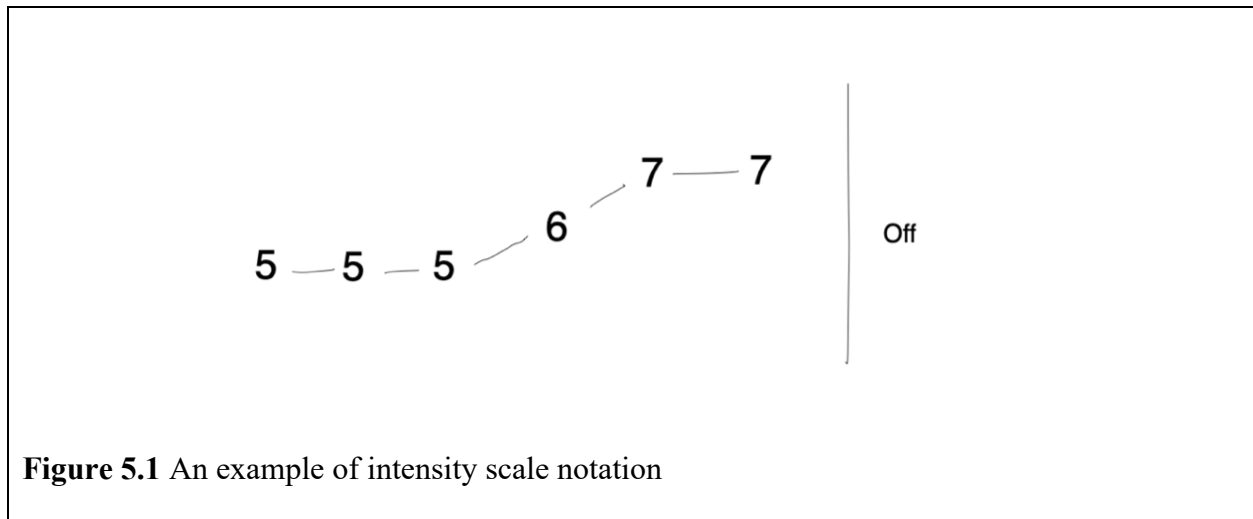
The pillar of choreography is not synonymous with any specific methodology; rather, it invites intimacy practitioners to build a collaborative toolkit for staging intimacy that is informed by the other four pillars. As one of the founders of intimacy direction, Tonia Sina's method for choreographing intimacy, *Intimacy for the Stage*, has become one of the most known practices for creating scenes of intimacy. Sina's methodology creates a roadmap through the use of an intensity level scale of one to ten. This scale is relative and defined by the actors. It can be used

to talk about the intensity level of any piece of intimacy and help identify changes in intensity during physical intimacy. Sina offers the intensity scale like a musical score in which actors count the moments much like beats. Perhaps the hug starts at a three, stays at a three for two breaths, and then increases to a five before one partner pulls back to a two. This arbitrary language provides landmarks for the actors within the scene. It relates the context and story of the piece to specific physical moments.

Because this scale is relative, it may take some trial and error before the group feels as though they have landed on a common understanding of the definition of a “level three” hug. Actors are encouraged to share their experiences and offer adjustments. These could include, “I think the pressure of a level three would be a little less than what we just tried.” Sometimes through the experience of trying, discoveries are made. Many times, I hear actors say something like, “that hug felt more like a four than the three we were going for, but I thought it served the story better.” When this happens, the roadmap can be easily adjusted, and the language between the two actors can continue to be refined until both parties have a common understanding of the intensity level scale.

This scale can be applied to a variety of types of intimacy. During work on a scene where two characters were sharing a forbidden kiss, the actors and I discussed that the kiss would grow over time. Using the intensity scale, we decided that the kiss started at a five. The two characters were fully consenting and eager for the kiss to occur, but the beginning of the kiss was still shrouded by fear. The kiss stays at the intensity level of five for three beats before increasing to a six and then quickly to a seven. The characters can remain at seven for two beats until the sound of a door opening breaks them apart. Using this intensity scale, I quickly notated the intensity

levels for later reference (see Figure 5.1). Sina’s intensity scale turns abstract and subjective actions into objective notation that allows for consistency in performance and promotes trust.



My partner is also an intimacy director, and because the two of us have worked together so often, we can map out a moment of intimacy verbally using these numbers and perform it with very little need to adjust. We have built our scale and language through years of practice. As scene partners continue to work together, this language becomes more accessible and can produce quicker results. However, this scale is specific to those who use it at any given moment and cannot be transferred without going back to the trial and error phase.

In working with Sina’s “Intensity Scale,” I have often split apart the intensity of the emotion and the intensity of the physical contact as though they were separate dials of the same switchboard. In my work, this separation speaks to scenes of intimacy where the physical contact may be limited, but the stakes for the characters are very high. An example of this would be a moment of intimacy between a beloved elder who is frail and an able-bodied youth. In this instance, the youth's character may wish to imbue their hug with tension and emotion but will

only work gently with the elderly character. I might describe the physical intensity of this moment as a one but the emotional intensity of this moment at a seven. By splitting the physical action and internal emotion in this way, the story of the intimacy and roadmap for its choreography can be better understood by all.

Sina's "Intimacy for the Stage" methodology is both a choreographic technique and a method for better understanding and de-personalizing stories of intimacy. It offers a neutral framework for parties to explore the story and choreography and supports stage management in its ability to be quickly notated and repeated. However, it is used most effectively when supported by sexual dramaturgy and contextual understanding. Utilizing Intimacy for the Stage requires a firm understanding of all five of the pillars of intimacy and is supported by various movement techniques. In the next section, I offer a small sample of additional tools that have been effective in my professional work that has been influenced by the work of other movement professionals in the theatre.

An Intimacy Director's Movement Toolkit

Intimacy choreography is not revolutionary for its ability to convincingly portray simulated sex acts for a live audience, though it often leads to better storytelling. Choreographers have been accomplishing this for several years and, when measuring their efficacy by the product's believability, have been doing so fairly well. This movement for intimacy directors and intimacy direction argues that the movement techniques utilized are only as good as their grounding in context, consent, communication, and closure. It prioritizes the actors' safety and sustainability over the final product of the story. Intimacy choreography challenges the notion that intimacy must be spontaneous to be effective and instead provides actors techniques and

language to develop their intimate performance. Beyond understanding the intensity levels, physically and emotionally, I will explore three specific tools that benefit my work as an intimacy director: anchor points, masking techniques, and movement qualifiers.

While intensity levels may offer a roadmap to a particular moment of intimacy, sequences of intimacy that are longer may need more support and structure. Intimacy coordinator Alicia Rodis uses the term “anchor points” to indicate specific moments during the scene that happen sequentially. During scene work, the intimacy director may establish anchor points as a method of blocking the intimacy itself. Anchor points are found at specific moments where a key storytelling shift occurs. This may be that the actors move from the bed to the ground, or it could be when someone’s hand moves from the face to the belt. Anchor points are different from beats in the scene as they do not depend on the character's emotional state, but instead, they are looking for key physical moments within the storytelling.

Before attempting a run of the scene, I run through the anchor points with the actors. It may sound like “You’ll come in the door, kiss up against the wall, hand to belt, push away, mount on the bed, shirts come off, kiss kiss kiss, rollover, and lights” This staccato language does not detail the duration, intensity, or any other storytelling component and *only* provides a quick outline to the physical actions of the scene. Anchor points reaffirm the sequence of events and allow actors to check-in before attempting to work the choreography. Like dance or fight choreography, the sequence of events is essential to the actors' storytelling and safety. A move cannot be forgotten or skipped over. Sometimes, in reviewing the anchor points, actors will move through the choreography without intention, working to build muscle memory so that they are freer to focus on the emotional storytelling. Anchor points can be as detailed and as frequent as meets the needs of those participating in the scene work.

After establishing the anchor points and the sequence of events, there may be moments that require additional techniques or masking tools. The word masking refers to a technique that creates an illusion on stage. The audience perceives that something is happening that is not happening. A simple example of masking is the use of a sheet during a moment of simulated penetrative sex. The actors may be fully clothed from the waist down, but the sheet's coverage creates an illusion that the characters are fully nude. The context of the piece will determine the type of masking that is necessary.

My general rule of thumb is that no one should have to feel someone else's genitals at work. This statement has gotten some laughs when I bring it into the rooms in which I work, but it also reminds us that what has been sometimes normalized as a part of an actor's job is completely unnecessary. It is, for the most part, understood that actors should never perform actual sex acts upon one another (this is already protected through Actors Equity Association); however, this line in the sand has been very difficult to see as culturally the definition of "sex act" can remain vague. I actively use the term "feel someone else's genitals at work" to highlight that, even though clothing, if someone is feeling someone else's genitals, that is not appropriate for the workplace. Especially for scenes of simulated sex, masking techniques can create the illusion of genital contact when there is none, providing support to the actors and preventing unintentional contact.

Intimacy work regularly borrows from stage combat techniques as there are already established and effective tools to create the illusion of violence and danger. Engaging in non-simulated violence on stage has become an outdated practice. Fight directors mask acts of violence using distance, depth perception, and other illusory techniques. These techniques for visual illusion can be easily translated into scenes of simulated sex. A simulated punch creates

the illusion that a fist is making contact with a face, simulated oral sex creates the illusion that a face is making contact with someone's genitals. Beyond simulated sex, these techniques can also be applied for kisses and even hugs. It is often assumed that actors must make lip to lip contact if there is a kiss; however, this is not so. As long as an actor consents to tell the story of a kiss, there will be a way to mask it that protects the actor's boundaries. I will not go deeply into masking techniques, as other scholars have done this more thoroughly than I have. Stage combat has greatly informed my choreographing of intimacy and supports the choreography of this work.

In some cases, because of the audience's position or design restrictions, masking techniques may require close proximity of the genital area. In cases such as this, the actor should be provided both a modesty garment and a barrier. Modesty garments are used to create modesty and privacy. Generally speaking, they are flesh-toned garments that are worn as coverage of the genital area. Examples of modesty garments include strapless thongs, nipple pasties, or pubic wigs. Modesty garments provide coverage but do not protect against contact or physical stimulation. For a situation in which an actor is working close to another actor's genital area, the addition of a barrier may be appropriate.

Actors engaging in close genital contact with only the protection of modesty garments are at a severely increased health risk for passing sexually transmitted infections. A barrier is made from a thick material and provides genital protection against stimulation, pressure, and provides additional sexual hygiene protection.¹⁷⁵ Barriers include sports cups, neoprene padding, and

¹⁷⁵ One of the most common questions I am asked is "what happens if someone gets an erection on stage." The answer to this question depends greatly on the situation in which the erection is

silicone nipple covers. The utilization of a barrier allows actors to get closer to the genital area to create the illusion of genital contact while maintaining protection. This is particularly useful in tv and film due to the proximity of the camera. Engaging in genital to genital contact without a barrier can be a form of sexual assault. The intimacy director collaborates with the costume department and may consult on barriers and modesty garments that fit the storytelling needs and safety parameters of the scene.

After understanding the sequence of events and building the necessary masking techniques, intimacy directors can further support the choreographer through movement qualifiers. Movement qualifiers describe the physical properties of a movement or action. This may be speed, tension, tempo, duration, distance, and many others. An intimacy director's arsenal of movement qualifiers allows them to translate the characters' intentions into specific movement techniques. Directors are known to coach actors by continuing to elaborate on the emotional life of the character. If the director wants to see more sadness from the actor, perhaps

occurring. Most of the time, this question is in relation to performing simulated sex and a fear that a scene partner will notice their erection. Sean Connery famously tells his scene partner that he is sorry if he gets an erection and sorry if he does not. This is a sensitive subject for many in the performing industry. One quick answer to this query is that the proper use of barriers protects the scene partner from feeling the erection at all. I assure actors that they are able to call for a break whenever they need one, regardless of the reason. With these measures in place, someone may experience an erection and call for a break without their scene partner noticing and without explaining it to anyone. They may do this with the full confidence that their scene partner cannot feel or tell if they have an erection.

they return to the script to further detail the kind of sadness that the character is understanding until the actor effectively performs the emotion to the director's approval. As explored in an earlier chapter, directors may also employ tools such as the affective memory exercise to obtain a specific performance from an actor. In the case of a scene of intimacy, techniques such as this can come with a large degree of risk in which the separation of character and self can be more difficult to maintain. If a director asks that an actor "be sexier," it can be very easy for an actor to internalize that as they simply aren't sexy. Scenes of intimacy are often difficult to coach using this method. The idea of "sexy" is highly subjective, and it can leave the actor vulnerable as they try to guess the director's understanding of "sexy."

As an intimacy director, I use movement qualifiers to help translate directorial intent into tangible tools that an actor can mobilize. If the direction is "be sexier," I may ask the director some follow-up questions about their understanding of sexy, the tone of the moment, and the goals of the character. After understanding and facilitating that context conversation, I may offer that the actor exposes their neck more and slow down their hand movements. I use the qualifier of speed to help describe the action of the actor's hand. This presents intimacy as a technique, in the same way, that combat, dance, and other character movements are techniques. Intimacy can be learned and coached. It is not something that actors either have or do not have. This element of the role of the intimacy director has been compared to that of a vocal coach, someone who offers a technique to support the storytelling of the piece. Intimacy technique can hold the acting technique and offer more support to the actor while firmly separating their performance of the character's "sexy" from their version of "sexy." The specialization of intimacy direction invites continued critical analysis and exploration of sustainable techniques for the production of intimate storytelling.

Questions of Intimacy Directorial Ethics

As intimacy direction continues to crystalize as a professional discipline, there is a need for a developed code of ethics. Disciplines within the entertainment industries decidedly lack strong and public codes of ethics. This adds to the learned industry culture in which “everybody does it” is justification for many kinds of misconduct. With this new area comes an opportunity to model self-accountability and invite those who wish to continue shaping the work of intimacy direction to contribute to that code of ethics for safe theatrical spaces.

Ben E. Benjamin and Cherie Sohnen-Moe, in their book *The Ethics of Touch*, offer that “self-accountability is the cornerstone of ethics. It is about who you are and what you do when no one’s watching you.”¹⁷⁶ Self-accountability is magnified in this moment, as the role of the intimacy director is still new. For many, their experience of this discipline is that they are the only one in their entire community who has heard of intimacy direction or attended even a three-day training. When there are limited opportunities to train and the community is in need, it can seem appropriate to take on the role of the intimacy director without thorough training. However, when thinking about almost any discipline in the entertainment industry, no other department head position could or should be filled by someone who has only a few hours of training in that specific discipline. Intimacy direction is most successful when practitioners hold a high standard of accountability and seek support networks before taking on new and challenging roles. In some cases, this may involve turning down work that is not a good fit.

This can seem like conflicting messaging. In one corner, people are advocating to hire the intimacy director, and in the other corner, there aren’t enough to hire. I argue that it is better for

¹⁷⁶ Sohnen-Moe and Benjamin, *The Ethics of Touch*.

the entire team to come together with a resource like IDI's "The Pillars" and work through the choreography together than to place the responsibility of being the intimacy director on someone's shoulders who does not have substantial training. Building group accountability while this industry develops, and new intimacy directors are trained will make the role of the intimacy director that much easier in a few years when there are more qualified individuals.

A production team's expectations must be realistic when it comes to what can or should be safely staged without the proper support and expertise. Without a stunt coordinator, it would be irresponsible to attempt to stage a high fall. Likewise, it would be irresponsible to attempt to do a high-risk scene of simulated sex without a trained intimacy director. This is not to say that some scripts are off-limits, but the risks of attempting to simulate sex without proper guidance and expertise cannot be ignored. In the case of the high fall, a safer solution might be for the actor to remain on the ground while the lighting and sound elements create the illusion of speed. In the case of intimacy, perhaps the moment of simulated sex can likewise be done in a similarly stylized way.

Beyond the ethics about who to hire and how to market oneself as an intimacy director, intimacy directors continue to struggle with the same artistic questions that many other artistic disciplines struggle with: what is the impact of this work? Stories of intimacy can be intensely powerful, and the intimacy director must feel confident that their work fits within their own set of core values. The intimacy director cannot be held responsible for the piece's directorial vision, but they also ask themselves if they believe in that directorial vision and wish to have their name on this piece.

This is a complicated question. It is the responsibility to ensure that the production of a scene of intimacy is done so safely and sustainably. If they choose to accept the project, this is

their priority. However, intimacy directors should reflect on their artistic impact and explore the implication of the piece they are helping produce. It is the responsibility of the individual artist to challenge representation and analyze projects through an intersectional lens and weigh the costs and benefits with their life circumstances. There is no line in the sand, and I do not advocate for a specific type of product; instead, I argue that this reflection and analysis process supports ethical intimacy direction, regardless of the conclusion.¹⁷⁷

Continuous self-reflection supports the intimacy choreography process. This ethical analysis will help prevent choreography that is harmful to not only the actors but also the audience and community. Storytelling is a powerful medium with a great capacity for change. Historically, scenes of intimacy have represented a very homogenous understanding of sex and sexuality. With this specialization, there is an opportunity to expand this definition of intimacy and the choreographing of intimacy to include multiple perspectives, ideas, and understandings of intimacy and human sexuality.

Because choreography already exists in many other artistic disciplines, it can be easy to assume that intimacy choreography is simply applying the same principles of choreography to a scene of intimacy. In these early years of intimacy direction, many professionals have jumped to the conclusion that they already know almost everything there is to know about intimacy choreography since they have staged intimacy countless times before. I do not argue that they do not have incredibly valuable knowledge about staging and choreography. Instead, I argue that if

¹⁷⁷ My company, Intimacy Directors and Coordinators, spent six months in 2020 working to create a set of core values that defined not only the core values of the company, but the core values by which all IDC certified intimacy professionals operate. See Appendix B.

we do not closely examine the inherent biases of current choreographic practices, then a great opportunity to create more inclusive spaces will be missed.

Context is the first pillar. It frames everything that we do in intimacy direction. It is not just the context of the scene (though that is important); it is the prioritization of cultural competency and the acknowledgment and celebration of the unique nature of every performance opportunity. Each body comes with a different set of boundaries and a new set of opportunities to explore. Each pairing of actors will result in a piece of unique art that could never be duplicated by another set of actors. Choreography is the process of finding the story and tell it safely and sustainably each night. Choreography does not need to be restrictive and can instead provide healthy boundaries that invite more freedom of expression from the actors. When they do not have to worry about their safety, actors can focus on the storytelling alone, which can produce incredible performances.

Although the techniques for choreographing intimacy are not revolutionary in and of themselves, the framework for implementing these techniques has shifted the theatrical landscape. The prioritization of process over product is a radical alternative to product-driven entertainment. Fully incorporating this will require that the entire entertainment industry investigate its relationship to ableism, sexism, white supremacy, and many other systems of oppression that are deeply entwined with the entertainment landscape. Additionally, I argue that the area of intimacy direction must *also* engage in self-reflection to actively reject these systems of oppression that are being upheld consciously and unconsciously. Intimacy direction has a responsibility to model imperfection, self-accountability, and continued growth for the betterment of the entertainment industries.

CONCLUSION

Intimacy direction is an incredibly new discipline, and while the demand for this position is continuing to grow, the industry's access to consistent information has not increased along with the demand. With the professionalization of this new industry, an accessible and consistent body of knowledge is critical to this position's long-term success. At present, those on the front lines of this work must often be both artistic professionals and ambassadors of this role. They are often tasked with laying a brand-new foundation for consensual working every time they enter a space.

The utilization of consent as a necessary tool for collaboration remains a relatively radical concept, even in some of the most prominent creative spaces. In some cases, I only have a short amount of time to choreograph a scene and introduce consent as a tool for this work. When I am the intimacy director on a production, the process tends to be smoothest when I have the opportunity to lead a consent and intimacy workshop before beginning the scene work. Even a short workshop can make a huge impact on the space. This not only supports the work of the intimate scene, but it helps to spread consensual methods of working throughout the entire rehearsal process. It introduces them to this role and helps actors build trust with one another. However, it is often a luxury that many theatres do not have the budget to implement. This is a challenge that many intimacy directors are currently facing.

The implementation of this new role will take time, and in this liminal period, two key pitfalls can derail this discipline's revolutionary potential. We must remain aware of these obstacles as this position grows in popularity and use.

The first is that artists may oversimplify the intimacy director's role and misuse the position for non-intimate work. For many, learning about consent through intimacy work in a

kinesthetic and safe environment can be an incredibly powerful experience. Because this work resonates so deeply, the other two branches of movement direction and protocol development may be glossed over. The role can become simplified as a consent advocate rather than a storytelling professional who utilizes consent in this process. This can relocate the responsibility for consent onto the intimacy director alone, rather than shared amongst the entire ensemble. For example, I have been brought onto projects and been told that the director is “a little handsy” and that they want me there “just in case.” In situations like this, I am seen as a babysitter or a safety monitor rather than an artistic contributor. In other cases, I have been asked to participate in non-intimate scenes as the intimacy director. This usually occurs with scenes of heightened emotional context. The tools of closure, context, and consent are critical here, but because this work is not intimate, it is not the intimacy director's purview. There may be a need for another type of advocate or mental health specialist, but this is not under the umbrella of intimacy direction. This position can only be successful when the entire creative team understands the position and remains collaborative and engaged with the consent process and the creative vision.

The second pitfall to be wary of is the current pseudo-celebrity status of the role. Performing artists should remain critical of who takes on the title of intimacy director to not lose the position's integrity. The attention given to this role by the media has led some to imagine it as a glamorous and lucrative profession. It is presented as an opportunity for an artist to rise quickly to fame and prestige. The competition for this work is relatively low, as are the barriers to entry. Too often, artists operate under a model of scarcity. Skills are added to a portfolio simply to say yes to a job when available, regardless of whether they are the right fit for the position. This model is incongruent with the work of intimacy direction, which requires that we operate under a

model of abundance and work to serve the creative team's needs. This cannot be done if the priority is ego, defensiveness, or fear.

The role of the intimacy director requires deep self-awareness, humility, and empathy. While everyone has a place in this movement, intimate storytelling, and the collaborative process, the responsibility of stewarding this position and facilitating its work may not be right for everyone. The pillars of intimacy direction must first be applied to oneself before they can be applied to others. Those interested in pursuing a career as an intimacy director must ask themselves why they want to do this work, interrogate what they gain from this work, and question whether they are the right choice for a particular production. This work can only be done well when it is divorced from ego and in service of the people on a production. The intimacy director must deeply understand their own boundaries and their relationship to power and consent before they will be able to advocate for others.

While presenting intimacy direction across the country, performing artists ask me how I see this industry developing over the next five years. As I have laid out in this dissertation, the five pillars of intimacy direction have revolutionized how we think about consent and body autonomy while creating scenes of intimacy. They support creative practices that dismiss urgency and favor advocacy and collaboration. These pillars act as a foundation for vulnerable work that invites all artists to the table, regardless of their boundaries and needs. These pillars are inclusive of all lived experiences and show practitioners how to move away from prescribed approaches to staging intimate material and towards a more sustainable future.

However, while the implementation of the pillars is essential for the practice of intimacy direction, they should not be restricted to scenes of intimacy. A foundational education in context, consent, communication, choreography, and closure can support every theatrical

discipline. While these concepts have been revolutionized through the development of intimacy work, when they are only discussed in this context, this industry misses out on an opportunity to inject consensual collaboration throughout the entire creative process.

In the future, I imagine that the intimacy director will not need to be the artist who first introduces consensual working. This will become a standard that all artists insist on implementing and are responsible for maintaining. Instead, the intimacy director can focus solely on facilitating consent, advocating for safety, and contributing artistically to scenes of intimacy. This work can act as a model for current theatrical disciplines to re-examine their relationship to power, consent, inclusion, and ensemble wellness. Perhaps it will also inspire the continued development of new professions, advocating and supporting artists during other types of high-risk scenes that are not intimate or sexual.

For any of this to happen, all artists must first engage introspectively with the foundations of intimacy work and challenge the dominant entertainment culture that prioritizes profit over people. Then, if the industry remains accountable to these new ethical standards, intimacy direction has the potential to dramatically affect the performing arts far beyond scenes of intimacy.

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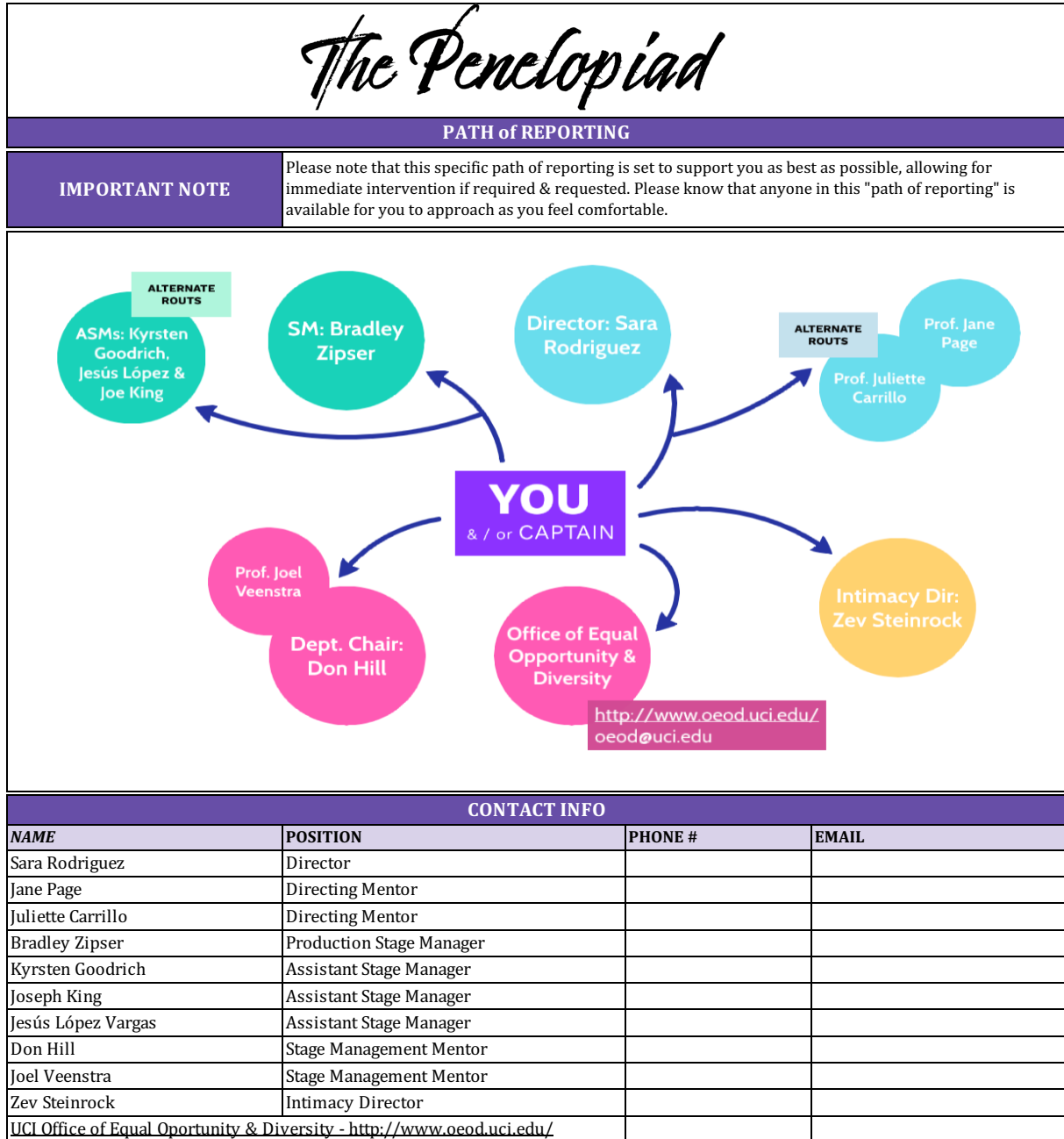
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APPENDIX A: EXAMPLE OF A PATH OF REPORTING

UCI | Claire Trevor School of the Arts

Path of Reporting Information



Created by the Stage Management team of University of California Irvine's Production of "The Penelopiad"

APPENDIX B: IDC'S CORE VALUES

CORE VALUES

A COMMITMENT

INTIMACY
DIRECTORS &
COORDINATORS

AUGUST 2020

ANTI-RACISM

IDC prioritizes non-homogeneous spaces in which those from a multitude of backgrounds are able to contribute and belong in this work. We commit to participate in the ongoing dismantling of the unjust systems of white supremacy in which IDC consciously and unconsciously participates, benefits from, and uplifts. Intimacy direction/coordination is rooted in the advocacy of all bodies and can only be successful when it is actively anti-racist and disavows all forms of white supremacy, including but not limited to: sexism, transphobia, homophobia, ableism, xenophobia, antisemitism, islamophobia, among others.

CREATIVITY

We are world builders. We are innovators. We are visionaries. We believe in the capacity to create that which does not exist. To do so, we must acknowledge and actively challenge the constructed systems that shape our world. We implement a vision that is fluid and rapidly evolving. It is through radical, courageous vulnerability that we build bridges between the present and future.

EXCELLENCE

Excellence is a continuous journey towards the development of the highest standards of our industry. It requires vulnerability and values failure as an opportunity to learn and grow. We work to remain adaptable to the needs of each situation, utilizing awareness and full body listening to create a ripple effect from the self to the community. IDC rejects perfectionism and fully embraces excellence as a dynamic and aspirational value.

INTEGRITY

IDC values shared humanity and accountability above profit or power. We cultivate trust, through our actions and in our practices, with honesty to ourselves, each other, and the community as a whole. We celebrate the history of multidisciplinary contributions that lay a foundation for this industry and accept responsibility for the impact of our work. We understand these qualities to be essential for the building of safe and ethical spaces.

SUSTAINABILITY

The longevity of this new industry requires that we strive for expansion without overextension. It is our responsibility to carefully assess our long-term environmental, social, and human impact. Through efficient use of our resources, adequate compensation, and time for replenishment, we protect our potential for progress. We believe that an investment in community care is an investment in our future.

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APPENDIX C: IDC RELATIONSHIPS POLICY

IDC Relationships Policy

IDC believes in a system of transparency; it is best to be public and transparent about conflicts of interest so that all parties may actively choose who to interact with and in what capacity. We believe that students have a right to know if staff members are in a relationship so that they can actively choose to whom and how to report grievances.

Workshop Relationships Policy

- Relationships may not **begin** during an IDC workshop
- Workshops end when the last person has gone home on the last day
- Hosted events after workshops still count as part of the workshop
- If you would like to pursue a relationship, you may do so, after the workshop has ended.

Staff Relationships

- All staff relationships must be disclosed before the workshop
- All those involved in the romantic relationship must sign a waiver stating that they are in a relationship and acknowledge that their personal relationship will not affect their professional ethics or ability to do the job.
- No staff member may report directly to their relationship partner(s)
- IDC accepts all relationships without justification of length or marital status, and encourages disclosure even in early stages of relationships
- Staff members may request to be housed together
 - IDC will maintain a budget for all parties to have their own bed - should that be requested
- Staff shall act in ethical, responsible, and professional ways during workshop hours, and may be reported should their relationship be perceived as affecting their ability to work professionally.
- IDC operates under a zero-tolerance policy

Student Relationships

- Students are allowed to be in relationships with other students without the need for disclosure to IDC
- In situations that involve IDC funded housing, IDC will maintain a budget for all students to have their own bed
- Students may request to be housed together regardless of gender or relationship status
- IDC does not support the beginning of relationships during workshops. Students are asked that should they wish to pursue a romantic relationship (physical, emotional, long-term, or short-term) they do so after the workshop has ended, and they have left any official workshop spaces.

Student-Staff Relationships

- IDC does not allow Student-Staff relationships
- Students may not attend workshops in which their partner is on staff, and vice versa

- Auditing or observing may be allowed, but if pursuing certification, these workshops will not count

Additional Guidelines

- Students are NEVER allowed in the dwelling area of staff members during workshops, regardless of whether IDC paid for the staff housing
- Should a staff member be discovered in an inappropriate relationship with a student, they will be fired without pay or severance
- Staff may be in each-others dwelling areas
- Students may be in each-others dwelling areas

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